

This electronic thesis or dissertation has been downloaded from the King's Research Portal at <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/>



Victory and Strategic Culture

The Marines, the Army and Vietnam; First Corps Tactical Zone 1965-1971

Velicogna, Arrigo

Awarding institution:
King's College London

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without proper acknowledgement.

END USER LICENCE AGREEMENT



Unless another licence is stated on the immediately following page this work is licensed

under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

licence. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- Non Commercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works - You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Any of these conditions can be waived if you receive permission from the author. Your fair dealings and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Victory and Strategic Culture: The Marines, the Army and Vietnam; First Corps Tactical Zone 1965-1971

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the subject of

WAR STUDIES

By

Arrigo Velicogna

King's College London, March 2013

Abstract

The Vietnam War has been subject of considerable research, both immediately after its conclusion and in more recent times in light of the new prolonged conflicts involving the United States armed forces. Yet, despite the considerable amount of published and unpublished material several assumptions have been accepted without the necessary criticism. One of these assumption is the fact that the US Army under General William C. Westmoreland was a static and unimaginative organization while the US Marine Corps had found the key to defeat the communist insurgency in Vietnam.

The aim of this thesis is to examine this assumption in the context of the two services development before 1965 and of the conduct of their operations during the actual war. Examining the development of US counterinsurgency doctrine demonstrates that the US Army was not a passive spectator but took an active lead in the process. Furthermore there is no evidence that the US Marine Corps (USMC) was able to craft a war winning strategy in Vietnam and that its inability to operate in a combined arms and combined services environment damaged the overall effectiveness of the American war effort.

These differences emerge from the fact that, contrarily to the common opinion, the USMC was the less flexible organization dominated by a close group of infantry officers while the Army, owing to its more complex make up, was able to operate with flexibility and efficiency crafting an effective method to fight in Vietnam.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	6
Glossary	8
Introduction	9
Research Questions	10
A Still More Important Question?.....	15
Existing Literature	16
Secondary Sources.....	18
Problems and Methods.....	29
Chapter 1: Development of US Army ‘small wars’ doctrine	36
1.1 Introduction	36
1.2 Early COIN 1945-1953	40
1.3 Counterinsurgency in the New Look era	55
1.5 COIN Doctrine 1960-1965	64
1.6 Counterinsurgency doctrine evaluated	69
Chapter 2: USMC and counterinsurgency 1945-1963.....	78
2.1 Introduction	78
2.2 US Marine Corps Approach to Doctrine.....	82
2.2 Post War doctrine	85
2.3 Amphibious Assault and Air-mobility	88
2.4 COIN resurgence?	92
2.5 Marines and COIN, a balance.....	95
Chapter 3: Entering Vietnam, 1961-65.....	101
3.1 Introduction	101
3.2 Vietnam 1956-1960, Initial Assistance and Planning.....	102
3.3 1960-1963 COIN by Advisor	116
3.3 The Failure of Advice 1963-1964	128
3.4 Invasion 1964-65.....	133
3.5 An Army in Search of a Mission	141
3.6 Bullies and Termites, toward a Campaign Plan, 1965	142
3.7 The Right Direction?	146

Chapter 4: Marines and Strategy, 1965-1966	149
4.1 Introduction	149
4.2 The I Corps Tactical Zone	152
5.3 The Creation of the III MAF.....	161
4.4 Initial operations, June-September 1965	168
4.5 Emerging Strategic Patterns	178
4.6 Conclusions	187
Chapter 5: Securing the I CTZ, 1966-1967.....	198
5.1 Introduction	198
5.2 Continuing Trends and Problems.....	199
5.3 Losing the Laotian Border	208
5.4 Defending the DMZ, round one	215
Chapter 6: The Years of the Offensives 1967-1968	226
6.1 Introduction	226
6.2 The McNamara Line and the evolution of the frontier strategy	228
6.3 The PAVN Summer-Fall offensive	232
6.4 General Offensive General Uprising.	238
6.5 Counterattack	247
6.6 Back into the A Shau, first try.	259
6.7 Defending the DMZ, Round Three	263
Chapter 7: High Mobility and Stand-Down 1969-1971.....	271
7.1 Introduction	271
7.2 The III MAF new campaign plan.....	274
7.3 Protecting the DMZ.....	279
7.4 A Shau, round 2.....	281
7.4 1970, the Year of Withdrawal.....	289
7.5 Wrapping up	294
Chapter 8: Victory Reassessed	299
8.1 Army success versus Marine failure?.....	299
8.2 One war, two wars.....	301
8.3 Sealing the borders	310
8.4 Rich man Army, poor man Marine Corps?.....	320
8.5 External or Internal causes?	328
Conclusions	340

Strategic Culture	340
An USMC institutional Failure?	343
Army Success?	350
Legacies.....	356
Bibliography.....	360
Primary Material	360
Unpublished Official Documents	360
Published Official sources.....	364
Secondary Sources	369
Books.....	369
Articles	374
PhD Dissertations:.....	376

Acknowledgments

After four long years working on this project I realized that I would never have reached its completion without the help of several individuals that had made this endeavour possible. First I wish to thank my mother who has paid every bill allowing me to reach this point without too many economical worries. Then my two supervisors, Professors Brian Holden Reid and Philip A.G. Sabin both from King's College who had nurtured, supported, and guided during these years. Even if he was not my supervisor I also wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor Andrew Lambert who supported me during my stay in KCL in several ways, including almost being my lawyer in one occasion.

I wish also to thank Colonels Bruce B.G. Clarke (USA ret), Jerry D. Morelock PhD, (USA ret), and Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks PhD (USA ret) for having answered a lot of questions on their own personal experiences and the US Army in General. Colonel Willbanks also helped me to craft the proposal at the base of this work. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Smith (USA ret) was instrumental in getting material from the US Army Center of Military History at no cost. Mister Tony Rooney from Australia shared with me his knowledge of the AATV and Australian operations in general and located several critical sources not available in this side of the world. I wish also to thank Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Leonhard Sr. PhD (USA ret) and Mitchell Land for their help in proofreading the almost completed product.

This endeavour would not have been possible without the moral and practical assistance of Major General Julian Thompson CB OBE, Royal Marines and Captain Michael Clapp CB, Royal Navy. They helped me when I was in deep troubles.

Despite the usual saying that the PhD life is lonely, I wish to extend my gratitude to all the friends that supported me in several ways during this adventure. The names are too many to list them here so I will only mention some. My colleagues, Yabuki Hiraku, Yuan Li Chung (and his wonderful family), and Alexander Clarke. My friends, Li Na, Park Jisun, Stephanie Wu, Sora Chung, Wang

Yifan, Hayashi Asako, Duong Tran, Hebing Dong, Kim Hyo-Jeon, and Yuan Chan and countless other that have stopped me to fell into complete madness and even listened to my over-enthusiastic lectures. I am sorry to not being able to list everyone here.

Finally, but not in order of importance, I wish to dedicate this entire project to Professor Saki Ruth Dockrill, without her guidance during my Master year at King's, her support for starting a PhD, and her initial supervision this project would never have seen the light.

Glossary

ARVN: Army of Republic of VietNam

CAP: Combined Action Platoon

CinCPac: Commander in Chief Pacific

CDC: Combat Developments Command

COIN: Counter Insurgency

ComC: Command Chronology; monthly reports redacted by Marine Units. In the footnotes they are abbreviated with as ComC plus the unit (battalion/regiment) designation. They are held the National Archives and Record Administration in the Record Group 127.

COMUSMACV: Commander United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam

CTZ: Corps Tactical Zone; military and administrative divisions of South Vietnam

DCSOPS: Deputy Chief of Staff OPerationS

DRV: Democratic Republic of Vietnam; North Vietnam official name

FFV: Field Force Vietnam; corps level US commands in Vietnam.

FMFPac: Fleet Marine Forces Pacific; Marine command supervising all Marine forces in the Pacific and reporting directly to the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

JCS: Joint Chiefs of Staff

MACV: Military Assistance Command Vietnam

MAF: Marine Amphibious Force

OASD: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense

OPLAN: Operation PLAN

ORLL: Operational Report Lessons Learned. These documents will be indicated as ORLL followed by unit name and period. They are held at the National Archive and Record Administration in the Record Group 472.

PAVN: People Army of Vietnam

RVN: Republic of Vietnam; South Vietnam official name

TAOR: Tactical Area of Responsibility; the area where a given military unit operates.

Introduction

From April 1965 to late 1971 the armed forces of the United States were continuously engaged in some of the fiercest fighting ever experienced by them in the area comprising the northernmost provinces of the Republic of Vietnam: that region was called alternatively First Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ) or First Military Region because it was under the responsibility of the I Corps of the ARVN, the South Vietnamese army. Initially it was the province of the United States Marine Corps (USMC) until, from 1967 onward, US Army units were sent there first to help and, later, to completely relieve the Marines. The region saw a combination of fierce conventional battles and counter-guerrilla warfare.

Vietnam was a unique war. It was a blend of high intensity conventional, guerrilla and insurgency warfare. It was also a war in which each American armed service used its own doctrine and tactics not only to fight the enemy but also to define victory.

The I Corps Area was unique in the sense that it allows the researcher to study both the US Army and USMC in the same geographically defined area and compare their operations in the same terrain against similar opponents.

Research Questions

Writers have been often biased toward a single aspect of the conflict in Vietnam, condemning the other approaches as wrong, ineffectual, or labelling them as politically influenced, 'orthodox' or 'revisionist' according to their personal tastes. More often than not the conventional aspect of the war has been simply brushed aside as marginal or has been attributed to a desire on the part of the American military and political establishment to engage in something they wanted to do rather than in something they needed to do. While several works have tried to place the political aspects of the Vietnam War in the larger context of the Cold War, very few have tried to do the same for the military aspects especially in relation to the transformation process the US military apparatus was experiencing in the early and middle Cold War period. Furthermore the majority of these rare studies have concentrated on specific aspects such as armoured, helicopter or fighter tactics rather than looking at a whole armed service.¹ Despite the lack of agreement that pervades the current scholarship on the War, one of the few universally accepted conclusions is that there were strong differences in the methods employed by the US Army and US Marine Corps. What these exacts methods were and why they were different is an additional source of disagreement.

¹ Ingo Trauschweizer, *The Cold War US Army*, (Lawrence: Kansas 2008); Andrew J. Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington: US Army 2007); Kenneth Estes, *Marines Under Armor*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute 2000); George Hoffman, Donn Starry, *From Camp Colt to Desert Storm: The History of the US Armored Force* (Lexington: Kentucky 1999); Marshall L. Michel *Clashes: Air Combat Over North Vietnam 1965-1972* (Annapolis: Naval Institute 1997).

The principal aim of this thesis is to explore those differences and to relate them to a doctrinal and cultural perspective rather than a simple operational standpoint. The basic assumption is that, despite what General Victor Krulak argued at the time, these differences were not dictated by just terrain and enemy activity but were, in part, the product of a different strategic culture. For this purpose, the term 'strategic culture' will be used in a more limited meaning than in other works. Here strategic culture will not refer to a whole nation but to a more limited scope: the one represented by the Service Strategic culture. This is based on the assumption that each service does indeed possess a distinct strategic culture that is not just a reflection of the whole national culture.² Using this assumption as the starting point, the thesis focus will be more on operations and tactics rather than strategy concerning the entirety of Vietnam but will maintain the idea that both operations and tactics flow from strategy. This apparent contradiction is born from the fact that during the Vietnam War neither the Army nor the USMC were able to develop any sort of grand strategy but, due to strict political control and a combination of local logistics, geography and force to space ratio constraints, were forced to limit themselves to what usually were defined as operational and tactical concerns. In a war where battalion level operations and movement were sometime strategic concerns it is important to explore these situations also.

The main question posed is what the two main American land-based armed services really were trying to accomplish in Vietnam, how did they plan to do it

² Thomas Mahnken, *United States Strategic culture*, (Washington: Science Application Corp 2006), p. 15.

and, even more importantly, why they did it that way? This in turn involves some simpler questions.

The first to be addressed is what the US Army and Marines understood by 'limited warfare', counter-guerrilla and counterinsurgency (COIN) activity. Despite having been often used as synonyms, these three terms have a quite different meaning. They were also used in different ways in 1965 than today. Tracing the approach of the two services to those three different concepts is the first question that had to be answered. The first two chapters will chronicle and discuss the development of both the Army and Marine interests in counterinsurgency and limited interventions between 1945 and 1965. These two chapters will also try to establish the context that was framing this interest and how it fit the overall goals of these two organizations.

The second question relates to how the American armed forces perceived Vietnam. Did the Pentagon really think, as the accepted historical view maintains, in terms of engaging in a simple conventional war for which they had trained? Or, did they develop an understanding of what was happening on the ground and adapt their plans and contingency options to the demands of the situation?

What actually was the strategy employed on the ground in Vietnam? Was it really the case, as has often been claimed, of a closed-minded US Army interested only in division sized conventional operations contrasted with an

enlightened US Marine Corps that recognized the true nature of Vietnam as a Maoist people's war despite Army insistence on conventional operations?

A related but much more complex issue is the extent to which the two services were successful in their approach. While South Vietnam was ultimately lost by the United States, the measure of effectiveness of the military campaign as a discrete component of the larger United States strategy in Vietnam is still open to debate, and it is a relevant issue on its own. Framing the question in a different way: the issue of how effective the military part of the American intervention in Vietnam succeeded in its stated goals, and how much different was the degree of success (or lack of it) of the two services had never been properly addressed except in a broadly brushed and, sadly, not well researched, way.

The final question and one which underlined all the others, is what factors shaped the Army and Marine approach to counterinsurgency and Vietnam? Were there cultural differences between those services despite sharing the same nationality, the same equipment and, at least theoretically, the same doctrine?

One of the main problems of the Vietnam Conflict, both in waging and studying it, is that not only one, but all five armed services were engaged in that conflict. Army, Marines, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard all contributed to the common effort, and all viewed their commitment through their own "personality".

That personality was created by their own doctrines, leadership, organization and history. In short what we can call their "strategic culture". In the past,

strategic culture has been defined as a distinct national culture shaping the entire national strategy.³ Yet a case can be constructed also on a service having its own Strategic Culture. It has been asserted that Strategic Culture ‘flows from geopolitical, historical, economic, and other unique influences’ and that each service has ‘its own unique culture, one shaped by its past and which, in turn, shapes its current and future behaviour’.⁴ History, competencies, interests, economic considerations and even personalities are factors that shape strategy and doctrine of each individual armed service just as they shape those of a nation state. As the leadership of a nation does not develop strategy and defence policy in a vacuum, so the leadership of a particular armed service does not develop doctrine and strategy outside the historical and cultural context of that service.

The US Army and US Marine Corps waged a parallel battle in Vietnam. Their own distinct strategic cultures clashed not only with the enemy but between themselves in many areas from operational procedures to the very definition of victory. Analysing how those two different strategic cultures were created, which factors shaped them and, more importantly, how they interacted and developed in South Vietnam is the aim of this work.

No one, until now, has really tackled this subject in depth. As it will be discussed shortly, previous scholars have too often contented themselves with repeating

³ Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* Santa Monica 1977 p. v; Colin Gray, *Comparative Strategic Culture*, in *Parameters*, Winter 1984, pp.26-33.

⁴ Gray, ‘Strategic Culture’ pp. 27, Mahnken, ‘Strategic Culture’, pp. 15-16; Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) pp. 7-8.

accepted truths without subjecting their conclusions to deeper and original analysis. The controversy surrounding the 'Provisional Report on the War in Vietnam' (PROVN) and its post war uses is only one of the problems with the accepted wisdom on the Vietnam War.⁵

A Still More Important Question?

Despite the tons of ink expended on the war itself, the operational and doctrinal aspects have been scarcely covered outside service publications. The American military is often represented as a single unified bloc, but such was not the case. Differences in doctrine, history and personalities shaped completely different approaches to Vietnam in each service.

Examining how historical, cultural, technical and even personal factors shaped the approach to combat and how actual operations were read and dealt with by the players is one of the keystones in examining how military organizations face the challenges for which they are created.

In Vietnam, besides the small scale actions typical of the initial stages of Maoist people war so dear to many authors, there were artillery duels and conventional infantry fights between advanced and highly professional military organizations. Far from being the backward popular force in black pyjamas often touted, the North Vietnamese army was a modern and well equipped force. Its artillery, for example, employed to full effect guns capable of outranging the majority of American guns of the period. Still, no one has examined how the American

⁵ Andrew. Birtle, 'PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal' *The Journal of Military History* 72 (2008), 1213–1247.

armed services coped with the mixing of conventional and unconventional warfare and how the two elements interplayed between each other. As it will be discussed shortly, scholarly interpretations of the war have always been framed as conventional or insurgency with the bulk of the literature favouring the latter.

Existing Literature

We have works covering almost the entire war in various amounts of detail and focus, but some important gaps remain. The US Air Force and the US Marine Corps have all produced detailed and multi-volume accounts of the war, while the US Navy produced a much less ambitious work mainly centred on short monographs. The US Army is still in the midst of producing its own account of the war. Only the first two volumes of its 'Combat Operations' series have been published, and they only cover operations leading up to 1967. By comparison, the USMC history spans 9 volumes plus an anthology. Taking a different approach from the complete coverage based on geographical area of the USMC volumes (that includes also operations of Army units in the III Marine Amphibious Force area of operations), the Army Combat Operations series focuses mainly on US Army operations to the detriment of other services and allied forces except when these elements were directly involved in those operations. During the course of the past four decades the Department of the Army and, later, the Center for Military History have issued many monographs about single aspects of the war, but they tended to concentrate on specific or technical issues. An official appraisal of the Army effort as a whole is still lacking.

That does not mean that the army has neglected the study of the Vietnam War. The Army Center of Military History has published a plethora of monographs and studies on specific subjects such as Andrew Birtle's two volume history of counter-insurgency and contingency operations and the recent publication of Graham Cosmas' two volumes about Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. While not a detailed history like the USMC's, they utilize recently declassified documents to tackle problems related both to the planning of the war and to the 'grand strategy'. Actual operations in the field are broadly described both in planning and execution. Detailed treatment of actual combat operations is left to the aforementioned 'Combat Operations' series.

Official histories had several problems. The USMC one has been criticized as being willing to present only the Marines' version of the war and ignoring or modifying facts when those are not supporting the official Marine view.⁶ It also has the habit of presenting operations through the lens of Marine infantry and ignoring other combat arms. All those faults can be directly related to its main purpose: upholding the USMC status as an effective independent service rather than providing an academic history of the Vietnam War. Notwithstanding its limitation as a primary source, the USMC official history has the merit of providing not only a wealth of official data about the Marines' operations in Vietnam, but it also gives the researcher access to comments of the officers involved and, in several cases, providing counterpoints to the official version.

⁶ Colonel (ret) Bruce Clarke, USA, *Expendable Warriors* (Westport: Praeger, 2007); Interviews, author with Clarke April 2009 and March 2010. Colonel Clarke was the district adviser at Khe Sanh during the siege so he was in privileged position to observe both army and Marine operation; Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 2008), p. 44.

The fact that the Marine historians had preserved their interviews allowed the researcher to use personal contributions of key people who have, sadly, passed away, in some instances without having left personal memories or other interviews. Army histories have been subjected to less criticism, but they have been in circulation for far less time, and certainly they have a far less coverage of the conflict. Despite these shortcomings, the various services' official histories, for the purposes of this study, will be considered as primary sources because they provide the official view of the services thus giving insights on their own culture.

Secondary Sources

Moving to the secondary studies, historically we can define two broad strands of research on Vietnam that have dominated the literature until recently.

The first one traces its origins back to Guenther Lewy and his image of an inflexible Army driven only by an ingrained doctrinal need to fight a conventional war in Germany and bent on creating a repetition of the Korean War in Vietnam.⁷ Lewy does not explain why the Army was operating in a certain way; he simply states Army doctrine was slanted toward conventional warfare to the detriment of everything else, but he never discusses the reason why. Lewy's ideas were further developed and expanded by Andrew Krepinevich.⁸ No space is given there to a history of the Army approach to what was then called Small Wars or Limited Warfare. It was the first try, and probably the only one, to

⁷ Guenther Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, (New York: Oxford, 1978), p. 63.

⁸ Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1986)

approach the war from the US Army perspective, but Krepinevich concentrates on a strategic level. More often than not, he simply brushes aside the operational level indicting the army approach as 'attritional' without giving too much explanation of the term and never discussing the operational and strategic reasons behind it. Krepinevich seems more interested in drawing lessons about the army hierarchy's inflexibility than to study the war. Also his tactical 'vignettes' are controversial and often not fully supported by references.

Despite its serious flaws Krepinevich represents a benchmark in the development of historical literature on combat operations in Vietnam. When he wrote his work he was a serving US Army officer, and his critique was embraced by a large part of the US Army.⁹ While in later years Army official historians produced a much more balanced historical analysis of the realities of the war in Vietnam, Krepinevich's simplistic assertion that the Army fought the wrong war due to incompetent leadership got wide acceptance. Krepinevich's analysis has been taken at face value by the majority of later writers and amplified.

John Nagl's, while allowing for some improvisation and experimentation at a lower level, again presents the Army as an inflexible institution rooted in conventional warfare.¹⁰ The most recent example is Michael Lind, which simply presents us with the image of an inflexible US Army using the USMC as an example of a more intelligent and effective approach, especially with his

⁹ Dale Andrade, 'Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19:2, 2008 pp. 149-150.

¹⁰ John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam*, (Chicago: Chicago, 2005)

Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program.¹¹ The CAP program was an attempt to merge US troops (in this case Marines) with local militias to provide a presence in isolated villages to increase local security.¹² He admittedly derives all of his analysis from Krepinevich.¹³

This is the same view presented by Peter Schifferle in his thesis, *The 1965 Ia Drang Campaign, Operational Success or Mere Tactical Failure*, published in 1994 at the Command and Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. There the author flatly states that the Army ignored everything except conventional warfare and dismissed every other position.

Instead of offering an historical analysis, this school offers a critique of Army performance and leadership. The image we receive from that school is one of an institution mentally and organizationally doomed to failure. Its strategic culture was fixated on waging large battles and was incapable of adapting to other circumstances.¹⁴ This school of thought also assumed that Vietnam was largely an insurgency based unconventional war and concentrates its attention on the Viet Cong, the supposed indigenous insurgents, to the detriment of the role of the regular North Vietnamese army labelled according to sources People Army of Vietnam (PAVN) or North Vietnam Army (NVA).¹⁵

¹¹ Michael Lind, *Vietnam The Necessary War*, (New York, 2002) pp. 96-105.

¹² Andrew Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 399-400.

¹³ Lind, 'Necessary War' pp. 83.

¹⁴ Andrew Birtle, 'PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: a Reappraisal', *Journal of Military History* 72, October 2008, pp. 1213-1214.

¹⁵ NVA (North Vietnam Army) is the US acronym; PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam) is the translation of the official acronym. In this work PAVN will be used as it is now the more accepted between the two except in quotations from sources where the original will be maintained.

The main problem of this approach is that it uses USMC operations as a benchmark to measure supposed Army failures but usually without discussing in detail or analysing the difference between the Army and the USMC. While those writers use the USMC Combined Action Program as a successful strategy compared to the Army big unit war approach, they fail to discuss this program in significant details.

The only author to try to address the USMC perspective is Michael Hennessey's.¹⁶ It is the only work which attempts to address the broad spectrum of USMC operations in the I Corps zone and balances both conventional and unconventional aspects of the war. Hennessey tries to balance the different requirements and challenges the Marines faced, but, while his work is worthwhile, it is limited both in scope and depth. The main flaw in Hennessey's approach is to ignore the operational and tactical realities and never question the suitability of the Marines' methods, weapons and organization to the operations they conducted. His work also suffers from ambivalence toward the US Army and its leadership. While he recognizes some of the merits of the MACV approach along with some of its strengths, he also tends to slip in the usual criticism of the 'conventionally minded' Army so dear to mainstream research. Still, Hennessey's lack of discussion of tactical and combat realities remains the main drawback. While he discusses strategy, he also assumes that the Marines' tactical methods were successful and appropriate and does not discuss their shortcomings in combat operations. It is worthwhile to note that the study is

¹⁶ Michael Hennessey, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972*, (Westport: Praeger, 1997)

clearly intended as a critique of the American efforts for future planners rather than pure history.

One of the key points emerging from this school of thought is a sort of didactic intention on the part of the authors. In Nagl the intent is very clear; he is not writing for the benefit of historical research but with the aim to improve US Army operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Malaya became the good example and Vietnam the bad example to show the key concept he wants to instill in the minds of today officers. Krepinevich published his work in 1986 when the United States were involved in Central America, while Hennessy's book was closely linked to the wars of the former Yugoslavia. To a certain extent they resemble Thucydides' work on the Peloponnesian war, cautioning Athens about the excess of its empire and written when Athens was embarking in its Second Delian League (or second empire).

Partially growing from this line of thought is what could be called the 'Sorley approach'. Lewis Sorley argues that the orthodox school was right in labelling General William C. Westmoreland, the head of Military Assistance Command Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, as conventionally-minded and uninspired, but he then contends that the army as an entity was not. He singles out two general officers, Creighton Abrams and Earle Wheeler, and an unnamed group of middle level officers working hard to reverse the wrong approach made by Westmoreland and to rescue the army from itself.¹⁷ He argues that they succeeded in creating a stable South Vietnam only to have it destroyed by the

¹⁷ Birtle, 'PROVN', p. 1215.

US Congress and its decision to cut aid to South Vietnam. Nagl has taken this basic approach in his critique of the Vietnam War, but has not pushed it as far as Sorley in claiming victory; instead he argued the shift in policies and leadership was done too late.¹⁸ One significant element of this approach is a heavy handed criticism of Westmoreland to create a better image of his successor General Creighton Abrams.¹⁹

This approach has been strongly criticized from several directions. Ronald Spector, makes a claim that there was no great change between Westmoreland and Abrams when the latter took charge of Military Assistance Command Vietnam as evidenced by the fact that large scale operations continued unabated.²⁰ Zaffiri makes the case that large scale operations continued until political decisions at home forced a change in operational posture, and Willbanks explains that even after the change of general orders from Washington large operations did not cease if the situation warranted them.²¹ Birtle and Andrade instead credited much more innovation to Westmoreland and early army planners suggesting that Abrams did not change the approach until he was forced to do by the reduction in American troop levels made by Nixon's administration in 1969-1970.²² The reason they advance this is that the combination of conventional large scale operations and less acknowledged small operations to support pacification had been put into place before Abrams

¹⁸ Nagl, 'Eat Soup', p. 180.

¹⁹ Gregory Daddis, 'On Lewis Sorley's Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam' *Parameters*, volume XLI Autumn 2011 pp. 99-105.

²⁰ Ronald Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, (New York: Presidio 1994)

²¹ Samuel Zaffiri, *Hamburger Hill*, (Novato: Presidio 1988), pp. 229-230, 279; James Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2004), pp. 49-50.

²² Birtle, 'PROVN', p. 1126; Andrade, 'Westmoreland', pp. 165, 169.

assumed command, and there was indeed a need to provide conventional combat operations in support of pacification from the start. Andrade and Palazzo, an Australian historian, even claim that in 1965 there was no real choice between conventional war and counterinsurgency.²³ Birtle, using the usual weapon wielded by the orthodox school, the PROVN report, creates an even more compelling case in support of Westmoreland's approach.²⁴ Yet despite its inherent historical weakness and serious criticism of Sorley's methodology, his views are currently accepted by the US Army even though they are in direct opposition to the Army official history and historians.²⁵

Advancing opposite conclusions is what Lind calls the 'Praetorian critique' and Andrade the 'Clausewitzian' approach.²⁶ Instead of analysing the reasons why the Army or the USMC fought in a determinate manner this school has simply developed a counterfactual approach and blamed the National Command Authority and its decision not to take the war to the enemy base, North Vietnam.²⁷

What both schools have in common is the tendency to reduce Vietnam to a simplistic model with a clear solution. Both models are so simple as to defy reality, but their simplistic vision of reality had increased their effect especially on military leadership. The 'Clausewitzian approach' has the advantage of

²³ Andrade, 'Westmoreland', p. 156; Albert Palazzo, *Australian Military Operations in Vietnam*, (Canberra: Army History Unit, 2006), p. 32.

²⁴ PROVN, Provisional Report on Vietnam, was the key document used by both pro and anti-war writers to base their criticism or endorsement of the war claiming that the report was a condemnation of Westmoreland strategy. Birtle, 'PROVN', p. 1245.

²⁵ Andrade, 'Westmoreland', p. 150.

²⁶ Lind, 'Necessary War', pp. 80-83, Andrade, 'Westmoreland', p. 146.

²⁷ Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy a Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Presidio 1984); Norman B. Hannah, *The Key to Failure, Laos and the Vietnam War*, (Madison 1987)

removing responsibility from the military, and, for this reason, was endorsed by the US Army in the 80s.²⁸ Krepinevich's model has instead gathered acceptance later, especially with the start of the ongoing 'War on Terror'. Its appeal is almost self-evident:

the current belief about strategy in Vietnam is apparent: Westmoreland was wrong and Abrams was right. Therefore, if the Army looks to the strategy used by Abrams and rejects that employed by Westmoreland, the 'mistakes' of Vietnam might be avoided in the future.²⁹

With the US Army again facing a prolonged conflict defying doctrine, the idea that there is indeed a simple solution that can lead to victory is powerful. Still these models are wrong and incapable of explaining what happened in Vietnam.³⁰

While criticisms of the US Army are quite plentiful and they often quote the USMC Combined Action Program (CAP), the Marines' effort to provide village with integrate American and South Vietnamese security forces, as an example of effective tactical and operational approach in Vietnam, there are very few attempts to compare Army and USMC operations. John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe produced one of the few attempts in this direction. The two authors have attempted to address the different perceptions of the Army and the Marine Corps and the conduct of operations at various levels (tactical, operational and

²⁸ Andrade, 'Westmoreland', p. 147.

²⁹ Ibid p. 150.

³⁰ Andrade, 'Westmoreland', p. 148; Hennessy, 'Strategy', pp. 186-187.

strategic) before and during the siege of Khe Sanh.³¹ While the focus of the book is this single campaign, it covers several strategic issues such as the genesis and implementation of the McNamara line and the different perceptions of strategy in I Corps area. It is particularly useful to the researcher because it is one of the few books to give a balanced view of Army and Marine strategy from several levels ranging from corps command to divisions and regiments and relating it to a specific area rather than a vague concept. It also portrays USMC strategy not as a single immutable entity but, examining the differences between the two different commanders, Generals Lewis Walt and John Cushman, as being in constant evolution. Furthermore it shows the debates inside the USMC command structure in Vietnam which is a topic not fully covered by the official history. One of the conclusions of the two authors is that the USMC, differently even from its own portrayal, was not ignoring the 'big battles' but was instead trying to achieve a balance between defeating the enemy both conventionally and unconventionally.

Colonel Clarke's is another attempt to look at differences between the two services. However, despite the book's authority it covers only a single aspect of Khe Sanh: the defence of Khe Sanh village, thus giving only a small snapshot of the war. Still it gives a very good portrayal of the lack of coordination, suspicions, and different doctrines of the two services.

Several authors have also tried to explain Vietnam through the lenses of the British experience in Malaya. Such comparisons tend to ignore the dissimilarities

³¹ John Prados and Ray Stubbe, *Valley of Decision* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute, 2004)

between the two situations, namely differences in geography, populations, and military equipment of the opposition. Robert Tilman sums up the problems of this approach:

Vietnam, however, offers so few parallels that any attempt to transfer the Malayan experience is at best misleading and naive, and at worst it is fraught with serious political dangers.³²

Moving from the specifics of Vietnam to the broader field of the evolution of the US counterinsurgency doctrine is covered only by Andrew Birtle.³³ The book covers the genesis and evolution of Army Counterinsurgency in historical detail instead of focusing only on the Kennedy years. It is a relatively recent work with the second volume, covering 1942 to 1975, having being published in 2007. It contains the most complete coverage of the topic and certainly is the one relying on the largest collection of primary source material. The view presented by Birtle, of an Army struggling with counterinsurgency and small wars almost from its inception and devoting a large amount of doctrinal literature to limited and guerrilla warfare even before Vietnam, is completely new.

The Army effort in Vietnam is linked with the perception of a flawed strategy (the big unit war) and with General Westmoreland. William Westmoreland is certainly the villain. Everything the Army did under him is bad and irrelevant to

³² Robert Tilman, 'The Non Lessons of the Malayan Emergency', *Military Review* (Dec 1966), p. 71.

³³ Andrew Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations 1860-1941*, (Washington: CMH, 1998); *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations 1942-1976*, (Washington: CMH, 2007)

the actual war. Often he is credited with having fought the wrong war. Even Army 'supporters' like Lewis Sorley have dismissed his command and instead focus on General Creighton Abrams and his 'new' strategy.³⁴ On the other hand, , deservingly or not, General Giap is considered a sort of heroic figure by several authors.³⁵ Still his autobiography and the derivative works are tainted by what Pribbenow has described as the Vietnamese habit to use history to justify the infallibility of the Communist Party and its members.³⁶ Yet, beside the memoirs of Giap, Westmoreland, and the first commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, General Lewis Walt, very few high level military actors have left their own memoirs.³⁷ Even in these few cases the auto

The label usually applied to Vietnam was 'counterinsurgency' and the Army approach was deemed wrong because it was conventional. Still the exact meaning of these two words are often left unexplained. The meaning of counterinsurgency has changed several times in the United States Army itself being used to indicate different concepts. For the purpose of this thesis insurgency will be defined as:

acts of military, political, psychological, and economic nature,
conducted predominantly by inhabitants of a nation for the purpose
of eliminating or weakening the authority of the local government or

³⁴ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, (Orlando, 2007), pp. 1-6, 21

³⁵ Vo Nguyen Giap, *'Big Victory, Great Task'*, (New York: Preager, 1968); Cecil Currey , *'Victory at Any Cost: The Genius of Viet Nam's Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap'*, (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2000)

³⁶ George Veith and Merle Pribbenow, 'Fighting is an Art: The Army of the Republic of Vietnam's Defense of Xuan Loc, 9-21 April 1975', *Journal of Military History* 64, January 2004, p. 164

³⁷ Lewis Walt, *'Strange War, Strange Strategy: a General's Report on Vietnam'*, (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970)

occupying power, and using primarily irregular and informal groupings and measures.³⁸

By extension counterinsurgency will be defined as the effort of the local government and its allies to stop insurgent activities. Conventional operations will define engagements between regular troops.

Another recurring problem in post-war literature is a tendency to rely on secondary or tertiary sources, often the same, and, even worse, accepting secondary or tertiary analysis without questioning their validity. More often than not primary sources, in the form of After Action Reports, planning documents or daily messages from various commands both in Vietnam and in the United States are not referenced. When primary sources are used they often come from edited versions like the Pentagon Papers rather than the original documents.³⁹ Of course the United States Government declassified the majority of those documents only in the last ten years; still, even later works are simply ignoring them. Ignoring combat operations and engagements, logistic requirements, equipment and doctrine, the study of strategy and operations in Vietnam has been largely reduced to a theoretical debate with insufficient historical basis.

Problems and Methods

It can be argued that the problem of US military strategy in Vietnam has never been fully tackled from an exclusively historical perspective but only from a

³⁸ US Army Field Manual, FM 31-15, *Operations Against Irregular Forces*, 1961, p. 3. Hereafter Field Manuals will be referred as FM.

³⁹ Birtle 'PROVN', pp. 1245-1246

political science one using a modified version of history to support recommendations for contemporary National Security Policy. Nagl compares lessons from Vietnam and Malaya for winning the insurgency in Iraq.⁴⁰ Adopting this approach, while it can be useful for military education purposes, is also producing a flawed historical analysis. More than a case of bad history, discussion of this kind are often didactic with a view to support classroom discussion of the lessons of the war.

The problem with that stance is that it is focused on current conflict rather than Vietnam and tends to gloss over the presence of North Vietnamese regular forces in the area. Willbanks and Andrade have recently pointed out that Westmoreland was aware of the dual problem, and he made a reasoned decision to concentrate on a single aspect.⁴¹ His resources were limited, and he was extremely concerned about a sudden collapse of the republic of Vietnam in the wake of a conventional offensive.⁴² It also assumed that doctrine, operational methods and equipment had no relevance on the development of US strategy. This approach also tends to brush aside the years between 1945 and 1965, especially the critical year following the armistice in Korea, and the transformation of the US Army and US Marine Corps from their 1945 peak to the force that waded ashore in Vietnam in 1965. In the end, mainstream scholars have failed to address the problem of fighting Hanoi's regulars and local insurgents or put it into the larger context of the evolution of the US military.

⁴⁰ John Nagl, 'Counterinsurgency Lessons', p. XI

⁴¹ Dale Andrade, James Willbanks, 'CORDS/Phoenix: Revisiting Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future' *Military Review* (March-April 2006), pp 9-10

⁴² William Westmoreland, *A soldier reports* (Cambridge, 1989), p 175

Even researchers that have addressed the problem posed by Hanoi's regulars have not dealt with them in depth. One of the critical flaws of current literature is a distinct lack of connection between tactical and operational works and larger strategic works. Discussing actual combat operations and how these interacted with broader strategic issues is fundamental to being able to properly address and discuss strategy. Summers' answer to the conventional war problem is a case study. He argues that the answer was simply to go into Laos and cut the enemy supply line, but, besides not being an analysis of actual Army strategy and operations but just a counterfactual theory, it also lacks any discussion on the feasibility of such an operation on the ground. Not many researchers have really bothered to analyse the effects of the big 'search and destroy' operations favoured by Westmoreland. The orthodox vision is that they were a waste of resources. But, if the enemy main force units were left free to operate, what would they have done? And if the US and Allied forces had simply discarded large operations for small unit patrols would they have survived? This is only a single aspect of the problem, but it is a question very few authors have posed or answered. Too often the basic assumption has been the idea that choice of strategy rested firmly on the American side, and, provided correct command decisions were made, the enemy was just an almost passive spectator. There is definitely a gap here.

The main aim of this thesis is to compare the two approaches. To do that it will be easier to follow a chronological approach. The aim is to compare the different

doctrines, operational orders, force structures and operations. Part of the aim is also to understand how these doctrines were created and tailored to Vietnam and how doctrine, force structure and enemy actions constrained operations and strategy. The underlining theme here is that organizational and equipment decisions taken before the intervention deeply influenced American capabilities in Vietnam and constrained strategic and operational choices more than the lack of flexibility of key individuals.

To do that, the first two chapters will look at the Army's and Marines' previous history, operations and doctrine as of the time. Next, chapter three will summarize the evolution of US efforts to stabilize Vietnam from a simple advisory effort to a full blown military intervention through the lenses of US Army COIN doctrine and its implementation in country. The next two chapters will deal with the deployment of the Marine forces to the northern areas of South Vietnam and the development of their own approach and the resulting shortcomings. Chapters six and seven will discuss the US Army 'take over' of the two northernmost provinces and the operations there until the dramatic shift from combat to advisory role in 1970 and 1971. Chapter eight will compare strengths and weaknesses displayed by the two organizations and discuss the underlying reasons tying the previous four chapters together. The underlying idea is to approach the Vietnam war from a middle level. The focus will be on doctrinal, organizational, and operational and command problems and go down to operational and tactical issues only when their discussion is necessary; strategic and political issues will be included as appropriate.

The goal is to show in a logical manner how the different identities of the two services shaped their doctrine, how that doctrine was used to define goals, and how the goals in turn created operations on the ground. But that is only one side of the coin. The experience on the ground also created a great deal of papers sent up the chain of command in an effort to modify the goals and the doctrine. The USMC operations of 1965 are not the same of those of 1967 or 1969. The same is valid for the US Army. Looking at how the results in the field affected goals and doctrine at the top in the different organizations is still an important part of their strategic culture.

Why limit the analysis to the 1st CTZ and not extend it to the rest of the country where the comparisons could be even more far reaching? The answer is simple: space, depth and ground. 'Space' because there are physical limits in every research project and Vietnam is a complex and multifaceted environment, especially if one wants to dig into the details and not limit oneself to the so-called 'big picture'. 'Depth' because there is still the need to discuss details when appropriate and to comply with the limit of the format. While it can be argued that we need a new history of the whole war, the 1st CTZ allows us to compare operations and results of the different approaches in the same geographical area. During and after the Tet offensive, there was a massive influx of Army formations in the area. Often Army units and commanders replaced Marine units in the same area of responsibility, but started to conduct completely different operations. For example, the A Shau Valley witnessed four major operations - three Army and one USMC. Khe Sanh and the DMZ were again similar situations.

Comparing how these different operations were planned and conducted and considering what their aims were is much more effective than analysing operations at the two opposite ends of the country, in different environments and with different tactical constraints.

What are the sources to do that? We have an almost infinite supply of relevant material at our disposal. We have after-action reports from battalion up. Also, official histories are full of useful details about operations and strategy. What can be done using them is really interesting. The simple exercise of comparing the reports from the Army Special Forces and the Marine operations around Khe Sanh reveals precious details about the differences in operational doctrine. They reveal much about commanders' intent and formation of strategy and aims. The case of Operation VIRGINIA is emblematic.⁴³ The difference between the after-action report by Lieutenant Colonel Bell and what the US Army Special Forces officer commanding the Khe Sanh Special Forces camp said was noticeable.⁴⁴ Moving one step along the hierarchical ladder, we have the Command Histories of MACV, Pacific Command and of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to provide us with additional information concerning the higher military decision-making process. State Department archives add the political framework. There is a wealth of other publications like field manuals and doctrinal pamphlets that can explain the various operational details and provide the necessary framework to understand why certain actions were performed and why they were performed in that way. To provide us the view from the other side of the hill we have both

⁴³ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 41-44

⁴⁴ Jack Shumlinson, *US Marines in Vietnam: fighting the North Vietnamese*. (Washington: USMC Headquarters, 1982) p. 141

the Official history of the People's Army of Vietnam and the even more interesting account of General Tran Van Tra and various captured documents that show how allied actions were viewed by the enemy. Last but not least are the personal experiences of those involved both as memoirs and oral interviews.

Chapter 1: Development of US Army 'small wars' doctrine

1.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that despite apparently contrary evidence the Army indeed developed doctrine and institutional thinking on counterinsurgency between the end of World War II and the commitment of ground troops in Vietnam. Its secondary aim is to identify the sources of the developed doctrine. These sources are to be found outside the Army itself but in foreign operations and political science.

Despite the general view that counterinsurgency (COIN) was a concept forced on the US Army by civilian leadership in the Kennedy's years, the US Army faced insurgencies and developed a doctrine for fighting them much earlier.⁴⁵ Also, Vietnam was not the first counterinsurgency campaign in which the Army found itself involved. The requirements of military governments in post war Germany, Japan and Korea forced the Army to understand the risk of insurgency in the first two and it faced a low level one in the latter. US Army advisors operated during the Chinese Civil War, Greek Civil War and the Hukbalahap insurrection in the Philippines, often with combat and leadership roles in the latter two. US Army units operated in COIN roles during the first year of the Korean War. Therefore the claim, sustained by the 'orthodox' school, that the US Army was theoretically or practically unprepared for COIN is unfounded. On the other hand, a case of a COIN oriented armed service cannot be supported. The principal mission of the Army was a major theatre war, and, after the conclusion of World War II, this

⁴⁵ Robert Doughty, *Evolution of US army Tactical doctrine 1946-1976* (Leavenworth: US Army Command and Staff College, 1979) p. 25; Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 3

meant a conventional or a nuclear war in Central Europe.⁴⁶ Also the practical role the Army styled for itself in COIN campaigns was not completely different from its conventional mission. One of the key points of Army counterinsurgency doctrine was that the Army was not fighting the insurgency; it was fighting its effects.

The usual contention that the US Army was not interested in counterinsurgency is similarly incorrect. Due to a varied list of reasons spanning from institutional survival to threat perception, the US Army spent the bulk of the years between the end of World War II and the commitment of major ground forces in Vietnam not only thinking about counterinsurgencies and small scale threats but actually fighting them.

As far as army doctrine and strategy is concerned the period between the end of World War II and the commitment of major ground forces to Vietnam can be divided into three broad eras. The first covers the years between 1945 and 1953, the end of Korean War, the second the years between the end of the Korean War and the last two years of Eisenhower's administration and the third one covering the transition between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations until the commitment of major ground combat elements in Vietnam during Lyndon B. Johnson's tenure as President of the United States.

Palmer, Collins and Doughty argued that in the first two periods the army was concerned only with major conventional and nuclear warfare, and the lessons

Trauschweizer, 'US Army', p. 1

learned from its earlier experiences were completely lost.⁴⁷ Only when President Kennedy took office in 1960 did the Army start to think again on counterinsurgency.⁴⁸ This view, which also became the official Army view, has been followed by the majority of writers until recently. Also in some official sources there is the complaint that if the lessons from the previous experiences were not lost mistakes in Vietnam could have been avoided.⁴⁹

This school of thought often quotes in support the fact that only after Kennedy's administration took power in 1961 the US Army published its first counterinsurgency manual, Field Manual (FM) 31-15 'Operations Against Irregular Forces'.⁵⁰ Furthermore, it defines this manual as the first "serious" attempt to address the situation short of full conventional war. The main problem with this view is that it not only ignores documentary evidence that demonstrates that the US Army was indeed interested in counterinsurgency well before the publication of FM 31-15 in 1961 in the form of service journal articles, training circulars or published doctrinal manuals, but, even more surprisingly, it overlooks the fact that US troops actively engaged in a COIN

⁴⁷ General Bruce Palmer Jr (1913-2000) wrote one of the first 'assessment' works on Vietnam drawing from Army official position, *The 25 Years War* (Lexington: Kentucky, 1984). He commanded the II Field Force Vietnam, was deputy commander US Army Vietnam, and acting chief of staff in 1972 between General Westmoreland and Abrams. Brigadier General James Lawton Jr. (1917-2002) was the chief of US Army Center for Military History during Vietnam War and coordinated the preparation of the first series of army historical works on Vietnam. Major Robert A. Doughty wrote *Evolution of US army Tactical Doctrine 1946-1976* (Leavenworth: US Army Command and Staff College, 1979) representing the official army view on his tactical doctrine.

⁴⁸ 'Counterinsurgency doctrine suffered from neglect and misunderstanding throughout most of that decade [1950s]... its interest in counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare waned. By the beginning of the 1960s, the US Army was not prepared in doctrine or equipment for conducting counterinsurgency operations', Doughty, 'Tactical Doctrine', p. 25.

⁴⁹ Palmer and Collins, quoted by John Gates, *The U.S. Army and Irregular Warfare* (Wooster: College of Wooster, 2002) available on the web at <http://www3.wooster.edu/history/jgates/book-contents.html>, last accessed on 1/01/2010, Chapter V, p. 6;

⁵⁰ Doughty, 'Tactical Doctrine', pp. 25-26

campaign in Korea in 1950 and 1951; even before this conflict they were used in advisory or support roles in several countries.

What is interesting is that creating and disseminating that doctrine was often done in opposition to civilian views or at least in an environment in which civilian agencies like the State Department were resentful of the Army dabbling in anything but pure combat operations. Doctrine was based both on internal experiences and foreign models: Germans in the early years, British and French in later ones. Previous US Army experiences were discussed, albeit in a selective manner, and the lessons debated. COIN doctrine was not simply accepting ideas from civilian universities and think tanks or implementing technologically driven solutions as some authors have claimed. Even during the restricted budgets of the 'New Look' era, the US Army conducted several contingency operations not involving tactical or strategic nuclear war. Clearly the US Army perceived the need for counterinsurgency operations.

That need gave strength to the development of capabilities, like the Army Special Forces, and a doctrine designed to meet the challenges of different situations. The process was not continuous. The development of counterinsurgency and limited war capability was often linked to immediate crisis or perceived threats rather than a planned need. The Army came to realize that every kind of limited warfare doctrine had to deal with political and diplomatic factors outside the control of the Army. The more the doctrine for such contingencies was developed in detail the more other areas had to be left

uncovered. Disappointment was felt by the Army with its own doctrine just on the eve of the commitment of ground combat units in Southeast Asia in 1964.

1.2 Early COIN 1945-1953

Yet the US Army was indeed interested in counterinsurgency and counter guerrilla activities immediately after World War Two. At first the Army felt the need of having to protect military governments in former Axis countries from the threat of a guerrilla activity like the famed, but almost completely ineffective, Werewolf guerrilla movement in Germany.⁵¹ To approach this threat the Army initially copied the Axis experiences. German training material had been recovered, translated and disseminated from 1944 onward, and several American officers had been on the 'receiving end' of German or Japanese COIN operations. After the war the Army commissioned several studies of German COIN tactics to better disseminate their experience to the occupation forces. Still, the Army's official and accepted position was that counterinsurgency, at the time called counter-guerrilla, operations were a mixture of military and political measures. The often quoted maxim attributed to Jiang Jie Shi (more widely known in the west as Chiang Kai Shek) is that 'anti-communist warfare is 70 percent political 30 percent military' was at the basis of Army thinking.

Even if there was a need for COIN doctrine, the Army was not in the position to immediately address this need. After 1945 the fears of insurgencies in Germany

⁵¹ Werewolf was the codename for the anti-allied guerrilla movement established by the Third Reich in its last days. While it carried out some actions including the assassination of the American-appointed mayor of Aachen it failed to live to the expectation of the Nazi leadership or the fears of the American forces.

and Japan were quelled thus shifting Army priorities. The US Army's most immediate task, besides administering occupied areas was demobilization in a political climate that was not favourable to huge military expenditures. In addition, doctrine required time and development and pre-war doctrine had been practically forgotten due to the need to adapt to a different form of conflict.⁵²

But the Army found itself involved in insurgencies almost immediately after the end of World War II. In rapid succession internal insurgencies broke out, or were ignited again, in China, Greece and the Philippine Republic. Then, in 1947, a low level civil war broke out in South Korea followed by a conventional invasion and a guerrilla campaign involving American combat units as "counter-guerrilla" for the first time in decades.

The rapidly changing world situation and expanded commitments forced the US Army to address the problem of unconventional operations in an official manner. In 1949 the Army commissioned Lt. Colonel Russell Volckmann to write a Field Manual on how to deal with those situations short of full conventional war. At the time the official definition was anti-partisan or counter-guerrilla.⁵³ The definition remained apolitical and it was still viewed as an extension of

⁵² Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 8-19, 117-118

⁵³ Russell Volckmann in 1941 was stationed in the Philippines. After the surrender of the Bataan and Corregidor garrisons he joined guerrilla bands and operated there until 1945, watching first hand Japanese COIN methods. After the war he remained in service and was instrumental in founding the US Army Special forces.

conventional warfare, but it was still the first clear evidence of Army interest in COIN.⁵⁴

The manual called FM 31-20 *Operations Against Guerilla Forces* [Sic] was first published as a draft in September 1950 and rushed to units due to the emergency in Korea. It was then officially published in March 1951 and followed in the same year by FM 31-21 *Organization and Conduct of Guerrilla Warfare* again by the same author.⁵⁵ Volckmann argued for a comprehensive politico-military approach to counterinsurgency. Volckmann's definition of guerrilla is complex and varied. He emphasized that the term guerrilla warfare covers every type of irregular warfare. He then defines four main categories in FM 31-20:

- a. A people's war or revolution against existing authority.
- b. A war conducted by irregular forces (supported by an external power) to bring about a change in the social-political order of a country without engaging it in a formal, declared war.
- c. A war conducted by irregular forces in conjunction with regularly organized forces as a phase of a normal war.
- d. Operations, generally of short duration, conducted by detached regular forces in the enemy's rear areas⁵⁶

⁵⁴ For a history of the various terms employed by the Army to define unconventional warfare see: Greg Metzgar, 'Unconventional Warfare: Definitions from 1950 to the Present' in *Special Warfare* Vol. 14 No. 1, 2001 pp. 18-24.

⁵⁵ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 134

⁵⁶ FM 31-20 (1951) *Operations against Guerrilla Forces* (1951) p. iii

Specifically the manual addressed the two extremes: popular war against an established government or irregular activities in support of conventional warfare.

Guerrilla warfare was further defined as:

operations, predominantly of a military nature, and characterized by the extensive use of unorthodox tactics, conducted by irregular forces acting either separately from, or in conjunction with, regular forces⁵⁷

As essential preconditions for every guerrilla campaign, Volckmann assumes two facts:

1. The presence of an external player providing supplies and safe areas
2. The existence of a network of supporters, propagandists and spies in the population.

Without the support of at least part of the population a guerrilla movement was not able to survive.

The manual stressed the fact that proactive actions were much more effective and easier to implement than more repressive measures. Good governance and economic development were stressed as the best preventive measures. Population grievances had to be addressed before they were exploited by a guerrilla movement. If preventive measures failed or were not implemented the repression of a guerrilla movement had to rest on an integrated politico-military plan. The plan had to simultaneously defeat guerrillas in the field, provide security for the civilian population and deny support to the guerrillas both by physically separating guerrillas from the population as well as providing sufficient incentives to the civilians to turn against the guerrillas.

⁵⁷ FM 31-20 (1951), p. 1

For military operations, Volckmann drew mainly from his own experience as a partisan leader, overall partisan experiences in war against the Axis powers, and from the aforementioned German COIN practice. Information on those German operations was available from captured and translated documents, direct interviews with former German Officers, and Army sponsored pamphlets written by the same German officers. It is thus undeniable that, in one form or another German experience was the basis for early American COIN.

Operationally FM 31-20 was the product of the lessons learned from German experiences during 1939-1945.⁵⁸ Offensive operations had pre-eminence over defensive ones to avoid the dispersal of assets in static positions and to improve morale in both the government forces and in the civilian population. The main objective of operations was not to seize ground but to kill or capture the enemy. Volckmann clearly pointed out that ground had no importance in guerrilla operations. The main focus in the field was isolating guerrillas from the rest of the population, and the solution, in typical German fashion, was a battle of encirclement. German operations were copied and praised. The four operational methods described in the manual dealt on how to encircle the enemy according to the different types of terrain in which the enemy could operate and were a complete copy of German operations in Eastern Europe. Large divisional or multidivisional operations were praised even if Volckmann duly noted that, once the main enemy concentrations are broken, operating in smaller units could be

⁵⁸ German experience in Russia on this subject was previously presented in two pamphlets published by the US Army: T-19, 'Rear Area Security in Russia' (July 1950), 'Rear Area Security in Russia, the Soviet second front behind German lines' Department of the Army, Pamphlet 20-240 (July 1951) and a digest published in the Military Review: Lloyd Marr, 'Rear Area Security' in *Military Review* Vol. XXXI No. 2 (May 1951), pp. 57-62

more productive. As a cautionary note, the manual warns about the difficulty of conducting proper encirclements due to troop density, geography, climate and local conditions. As an alternative, he suggested quick mobile operations emphasizing surprise, deception, use of local guides and small units. Ideally the aim of those smaller operations had to be flank attacks or double envelopments aimed at destroying the guerrilla fighting forces. Supporting arms like armoured forces and aviation had a place in COIN operations: armour in escorting convoys and providing road security and aviation to provide additional firepower even if its tactical flexibility had to be increased from the then current (1951) standards. The manual was emphatically opposed to the utilization of artillery. The formation of specially trained units to hunt guerrilla bands was strongly recommended even with the caveat that their formation tended to dilute effectiveness in the rest of the armed forces.

Tactical and operational counter-guerrilla activity was clearly seen as conventional combat. The manual stressed the relevance of conventional small unit tactics also in unconventional operations. Volckmann deemed basic small unit training of critical importance as well as the development of low level leadership. Army efforts in that direction were deemed satisfactory by Volckmann. He also stressed that small units' conventional tactics were equally applicable to unconventional combat which was a view echoed by several Army leaders.

But at a higher level, a clearer distinction between conventional and unconventional warfare had to be drawn. Emphasis was put on non-combat

operations and the need to build the trust of the local population. Good troop behaviour had to be strictly enforced at all times because indiscriminate use of violence was deemed counterproductive. Use of indigenous forces was strongly recommended, but the commanders were strongly cautioned to screen them to avoid the presence of enemy infiltrators and informers.

While there is a clear similarity with what the Americans did earlier in the Philippines the strong influence of the German ideas in the non-military approach is also evident. FM 31-20 clearly states:

The isolation of guerrilla forces from the civilian populace may be greatly influenced by the treatment given the civilians. In all areas there are people who want peace and quiet. Friendly and cooperative elements of the populace are carefully cultivated... Law and order are established and strictly enforced. Peacefulness is further stimulated by encouraging the people to resume their normal pursuits. Idleness and unemployment are dangerous...The basic essentials of food, shelter, and clothing are provided. Tyrannical action by either our forces or the local government is prohibited.⁵⁹

The same concepts are further expressed in *Rear Area Security in Russia*. Kind treatment of local population as opposed to brutal repression is strongly advised. According to the German officers, civilian population was mainly neutral or more interested in safeguarding their daily lives than they were committed to either

⁵⁹ FM 31-20 (1951) p. 71

side. 'In every country under military occupation there are people in all walks of life whose most ardent desire is the return of peace and normalcy.'⁶⁰

The main objective of a lenient policy was to foster support in that group. To that end the writer stresses the need to show commitment and support. 'Cultivating their friendship, assuring them of one's peaceful intentions and restoring the safety of their homes, their work, and their subsistence are the best guarantees for real security in the rear.'⁶¹

Still, the US Army advocated the right for strong measures where and when 'gentler' ones failed:

In areas where the civilian population is hostile to our aims and where they stubbornly resist pacification, stern administrative measures and aggressive military action are used to establish control. Firm and impartial treatment from the outset will tend to minimize the belligerency of the populace. These measures are closely coordinated with aggressive military action to isolate the guerrillas from the civilian population and allied support and then destroy them.⁶²

Two years later FM 31-15 *Operations Against Airborne Attack, Guerrilla Action, and Infiltration* reprised the same concepts and further explained them. This new manual was also written by Colonel Volckmann. One of the key points in

⁶⁰ Rear Area Security in Russia; (1951), p. 37.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 37.

⁶² FM 31-20 (1951). p. 72.

these manuals was the use of historical examples, mainly drawn from World War II, to further strengthen the concepts expressed in them. They were intended mainly as guidance rather than a prescriptive tool. Several articles on insurgency, partisan warfare, guerrillas and the measures to oppose them appeared in service journals witnessing at least an interest in the subject if not a deep concern on the part of US Army leadership. These publications certainly do not lend support to the contention that the US Army continued to be uninterested in counter Insurgency as had been subsequently said by Doughty, Palmer, Krepinevich, and, more recently, Nagl.

At the same time Volckmann was writing the manuals the US Army commissioned a group of German officers headed by General Fritz Halder to review the 1949 edition of the basic Field Manual 100-5: *Operations*, the basis of Army doctrine.⁶³ The German commission was highly critical of the lack of detailed doctrine on anti-partisan warfare and not only recommended the introduction of a chapter dedicated to such operations but actually wrote one.⁶⁴ The subsequent edition of FM 100-5 acknowledged the German critique and rectified the situation with additional material even if the 'German' chapter was not included for a variety of technical reasons.

In this same period, US Army personnel and units were also directly involved in advising several counterinsurgency operations in Greece and the Philippines. Also there is the overlooked fact that US troops were directly employed in

⁶³ Fritz Halder (1884-1972), chief of staff of the German Army from 1938 to 1942; after the war he worked as historian for the US Army.

⁶⁴ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 145-146

counterinsurgency operations during the military occupation of Korea especially in the so called 'Autumn Harvest Uprisings' in 1946, and they took an active role in COIN operations after the North Korean invasion in June 1950 and the subsequent direct intervention on the peninsula.⁶⁵

Still, part of the problem of addressing insurgencies was that there was no agreed upon consensus on what constituted unconventional warfare, limited warfare, insurgency or even guerrilla warfare. These words were used with different meanings during this period, often with interchangeable meanings. It was not until 1961 some semblance of agreement was reached on the meaning of these disputed terms. Initially the underpinning idea was that guerrilla, partisan and unconventional operations were intended to be an adjunct to conventional warfare as expressed by Colonel W. R Peers:

Generally speaking, guerrilla activities are designed to harass the enemy in his rear areas by attacking his personnel, destroying his installations, and disrupting his lines of communication. If properly organized and directed, guerrillas have a decided effect upon the enemy's tactical operations.⁶⁶

Also there was no special distinction between the words guerrilla, partisan or irregular warfare:

Activity carried on against an enemy by people who are devoted adherents to a cause, but who are not members of organized and recognized military

⁶⁵ Millet, Allan R., *The War for Korea: A House Burning* (Lawrence: Kansas 2005), p. 85

⁶⁶ Robert Peers, 'Guerrilla operations in Northern Burma' in *Military Review*, vol. XXVIII, No. 3 (June 1948), 10-16, p. 10

forces. It includes guerrilla action, passive resistance by underground groups, espionage, sabotage, and propaganda.⁶⁷

While the motivational background and rationale behind guerrilla movements were amply discussed in FM 31-20, in this period the focus of those 'early' articles was on offensive activities against enemy forces and on organizational problems. A typical example was an April 1950 article on the Greek Civil War. The author concentrates in describing a single battle in purely conventional terms.⁶⁸ This could be partly attributed to the fact that the main source for counterinsurgency doctrine was the German view of Soviet unconventional warfare behind the lines during 1941-1945. Soviet partisans and 'guerrillas' were used to directly hamper German military operations on the Eastern Front rather than to destabilize local government. The 1945 US Army was keen on studying and analysing German methods, as it has been in its earlier history. First Prussian then German operational and tactical approaches had always exercised a deep attraction on American military thought after Civil War. In part the underlining reason was that it fit cleanly in the apolitical culture of the Army. Yet the Army was also realizing that insurgencies were "political" wars.

During this period the Army strongly believed that even if unconventional warfare occurred, it was an extension of conventional operations, rather than a tool to be employed on its own. This assumption was confirmed by the publication in October 1951, of FM 31-21 'Organization and Conduct of Guerrilla

⁶⁷ 'Partisan Warfare', Dictionary of United States Army Terms (August 1950)

⁶⁸ Frederick H. Loomis, 'Report from Greece' in *Military Review* vol. XXX no. 1 (April 1950) pp. 8-9

Warfare'. While ostensibly a manual on offensive guerrilla warfare, it contained a further development of the concepts explained in the preceding FM 31-20.⁶⁹

FM 31-21 was the first publication stating that: 'The organization and exploitation of guerilla forces often touch upon spheres and policies outside those of the military establishment.'⁷⁰ The manuals also defined guerrilla as:

the operations of discontented or hostile elements of a population against established civil and military authority by various hidden and open methods. The individuals who take part in a resistance movement are held together by common sympathies and interests, often political⁷¹

Together with FM 31-20 the two manuals formed the cornerstone of counter-guerrilla doctrine for the period even if, as far operations were concerned, they were more a summary of the then current techniques used in Korea, Greece and Philippines rather than a new or a revolutionary take on the subject.⁷²

In Korea military and paramilitary security forces performed a series of large divisional size sweeps on areas containing communist guerrillas while the police attempted to establish permanent control in those areas while reducing the population's support for the guerrillas by persuasion in the form of propaganda and efforts to address local grievances. The first of those operations was the 1949 suppression of the Yosu mutiny and the subsequent anti-guerrilla campaign.⁷³ In the first phase, after having more or less survived the initial burst

⁶⁹ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p.143.

⁷⁰ FM 31-21 *Organization and Conduct of Guerrilla Warfare*, 1951, p. 1.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 2.

⁷² John E. Bebe, 'Beating the guerrilla' in *Military Review*, Vol. XXIV, No. 9 pp. 3-18.

⁷³ Millet, 'House Burning', pp. 166-171.

of violence, Regular Army and Police units sealed the area and proceeded to evict guerrillas and insurgents from the major population centres. Follow on operations were characterized by aggressive patrolling by small and large units and extensive, if not always successful, efforts to cordon off the area to prevent the enemy from escaping. One of the major tenets of the operations was not only to kill guerrillas but to force them to constantly move and disrupt their supply system and, at the same time, improve control of villages and resettling those that could not be protected.⁷⁴

Even after the conventional phase of the Korean War broke out in June 1950, these operations continued. After the initial invasion was repulsed by American and allied forces the guerrilla activity level increased.⁷⁵ South Korean Army divisions had to be detached from the frontline to conduct divisional sweeps in the rear areas. After the Chinese intervention even US Army and USMC troops had to perform those operations.⁷⁶ In the end these major operations were considered successful, though it was understood that alone they could not be sufficient to defeat the insurgency. Also, the reliance on large, German or Japanese style counter guerrilla encirclements in Korea was criticized as having been pushed beyond the point of diminishing returns after the guerrillas were completely dispersed.⁷⁷ While operations like RATKILLER were praised and deemed successful, by the end of 1952 US advisors were pressing Korean forces

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.225.

⁷⁵ Bebe, 'Beating' p. 7.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 121.

to adopt small unit patrols rather than large unit sweeps.⁷⁸ By the same rationale even during the height of the large sweeps the Americans placed much more reliance on infantry than firepower. As an example, during RATKILLER General James A. Van Fleet persuaded Korean units to operate without artillery showing the stress placed by the Army leadership on small unit tactics rather than firepower.⁷⁹

At the time the Army approached counterinsurgency operations from a standpoint where it was believed that even if large military operations had to be conducted the overall campaign had to be part of a unified effort involving local political and economic improvements. Military measures alone were a temporary answer to solve the immediate crisis, but they would not solve the problem.

The end of the Korean War prompted the military establishment to draw several conclusions. The first and foremost was that guerrilla insurgencies were, by their own nature, lightly and poorly equipped and government forces were not required to use large amounts of firepower. Counterinsurgency was thus definitely a light infantryman's job. That conclusion formed the basis of criticism voiced by part of the Army on how counter-guerrilla operations were conducted in Korea. The reliance by South Korean forces on firepower was severely criticized and to a lesser extent also the similar tendency shown by

⁷⁸ Ratkiller was one of the largest COIN operations in Korea. It involved more than 30000 South Korean troops, lasted several Months from December 1951 to March 1952 and was planned by General James Van Fleet, commander of UN forces Korea and former lead of the Joint United States Military Advisory and Planning Group Greece.

⁷⁹ James A Van Fleet (1892-1992), after distinguished service in World War 2, led the US Assistance mission to Greece (1946-1950) and then the 8th US Army in Korea from 1951 to 1953.

contemporary Filipino ones. The primacy of the infantryman as a counter-guerrilla weapon was established after the Korean War and elevated to a postulate in field manuals.⁸⁰ At the opposite end of the spectrum it was established that police forces and static security measures were insufficient to confront guerrillas.⁸¹ For the Army the outbreak of guerrilla activity clearly signalled the failure of police measures and the need for definite military action. While static security was deemed necessary, it was to be carried out by local paramilitary forces. Regular army units, both indigenous and eventually American, had to operate offensively.

Continuing Korean operations prompted a further refinement of the doctrine. Excerpts from the Volckmann manuals were included in the base Army doctrinal manual, FM 100-5: *Operations* that now included a full chapter on counterinsurgency operations. Then, in 1953, FM 31-15: *Operations against Airborne Attack, Guerrilla Action and Infiltration* was published. It reinstated the operational and tactical concepts expressed in previous manuals, but deferred the readers to FM 31-20 and FM 31-21 for discussion of the issues of insurgency and guerrilla warfare outside the realm of tactics. According to the Command and General Staff College official view, the doctrine was sufficient in the light of the operations conducted.⁸²

⁸⁰ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 121-122.

⁸¹ Bebe, 'Beating', p. 10; also 'a passive defense based on scattered security strong points is not sufficient, no matter how well such a defense may be organized' Rear Area Security, p. 35.

⁸² 'Current United States Army doctrine on anti-guerrilla warfare as enunciated in Field Manual 100-5, Field service Regulations-Operations, Field Manual 31-15, *Special Operations-Operations Against Airborne Attack, Guerrilla Action and Infiltration* and Field Manual 31-20, *Special Operations—Operations Against Guerrilla Forces* is sound and adequate.' Bebe, 'Beating', p. 55.

1.3 Counterinsurgency in the New Look era

Still, as an institution, the Army seemed to be not completely satisfied with the Korean operations. The end of the war sparked additional debates about irregular warfare that soon merged with the larger one about the role of the Army and its mission. The reformulation of security policy made during the Eisenhower administration deeply affected the service. The desire to reduce military spending and still provide security assurance to allied countries prompted a review of commitments and policies of the United States in which, at least initially, the US Army emerged as the losing side because a large and powerful conventional US Army was not deemed essential or even practical in the new nuclear age, and certainly it was deemed too expensive. The threat to the existence of the US Army prompted different reactions. On one side General James Gavin stressed in nuclear weapons to prove the Army was still able to fight on a nuclear battlefield and tried to compensate for a reduction in numbers with increases in firepower.⁸³

On the other side some officers saw in limited and unconventional war a way to prove the Army was still needed in the new 'nuclear age'. The experience of Korea, where guerillas were used offensively by both sides, seemed to influence some sources of Army thinking especially among those in the Special Forces.⁸⁴ According to some publications, 'undue stress is being placed on the defense against guerrilla attack and on counterintelligence and security training.'⁸⁵ That

⁸³ Trauschweizer, 'US Army', pp. 48-51.

⁸⁴ Richard Kiper, 'Unconventional Warfare in Korea: Forgotten Aspect of the "Forgotten War" in *Special Warfare*, Vol. 16 No. 2 (2003) pp. 26-37.

⁸⁵ George Metcalf, 'Offensive Partisan Warfare' in *Military Review* Vol. XXXII No. 1 (April 1952), pp 53-61, p. 53.

school of thought envisioned an offensive utilization of unconventional warfare against the United States' opponents mainly aimed at supporting allied conventional forces in Europe.⁸⁶ That view also had the advantage that it fit in the new budgetary restrictions of the Eisenhower years; the 'flirtation' with offensive guerrilla warfare has also been seen in this light by contemporary historians.⁸⁷

The Army moved responsibility for creating unconventional warfare doctrine from the Infantry School to the Special Forces School. Irregular warfare, offensive, defensive or its suppression was certainly not applicable during the eight years of Eisenhower's administration. There were neither resources, opportunities nor the political motivation to engage in unconventional operations. Army Special Forces, that were active in advisory roles overseas, seemed the prime candidate for pursuing the COIN effort. Yet the move, while logical, was almost a total failure. Special Forces' resources were inadequate for the task and more importantly the Special Forces had no interest in COIN operations because at the time they were the foremost proponent of the use of

⁸⁶ Examples of that line of thinking are: Albert Harris, 'Partisan Warfare' in *Military Review* Vol. XXX No. 5 (August 1950) pp. 10-20.

⁸⁷ Tauschweizer, 'US Army', p. 28; 'the broad aims of guerrilla strategy are to: lessen the enemy's combat effectiveness; delay and disrupt operations of the enemy forces; and weaken the morale and will to resist of a hostile military force.' Richard Gruenther, 'Guerrilla Warfare' *Infantry* 1957, Vol. 47 No. 2 p. 61, and "This is the major lesson from the past; more specific lessons which have emerged are:

1. The need for training the regular army in both guerrilla and antiguerrilla measures now.
2. The preparation and planning in peace of an organization to control, equip, and support guerrillas before hostilities commence so that guerrilla forces can go into action at the outset.
3. Coordination of the activities of guerrilla units so that their efforts are directed to the attainment of the aim of the regular forces' commander.
4. The necessity for ensuring the loyalty and support of the civil population for the guerrillas; and a corollary in the case of enemy occupied territory, not to involve the civil population directly in case of reprisals against them.
5. The value of air support in delivery and evacuation of guerrillas and the maintenance of forces."

C.H.A. East, 'Guerrilla Warfare' *Military Review*, Vol. XXXVII No. 6 (September 1957), pp. 95-100, p. 99.

insurgency as an offensive tool. Thus counterinsurgency languished from a doctrinal stand point. The new edition of the relevant manuals, written under the aegis of the Special Forces, were simply a condensed version of Volckmann's ones. The two previous manuals were combined into one, and, to avoid having an overwhelmingly thick manual, historical examples and theoretical discussions were removed while the same basic approach was retained. Civic action, effective and reformed minded governance, strict police control, and encirclement operations were the staples of doctrine for unconventional operations. Nothing had really changed from the previous era.

At the same time counterinsurgency was being marginalized by the Army as whole due to a combination of lack of resources and a different political focus, it was also widely advertised by high level officers.⁸⁸ If the Army was certainly not expending resources to adapt itself to COIN operations or to rethinking its doctrine, it was surely exploiting limited warfare and insurgencies to create a public case for its expansion. The international situation was changing. Mainstream thinkers in the Army saw guerrillas mainly as a tool of communist subversion and thus something to defend against. The majority of unconventional conflicts then waged saw the United States or their allies repressing rather than encouraging guerrilla activities. Malaya, the Philippines, Indochina and Algeria started to figure prominently in army publications and also in the public debates of the time. Insurgency moved from a war of 'decolonization' against an occupying power to a product of communism and an offensive type of warfare conducted against the "free world nations". In an

⁸⁸ Trauschweizer, 'US Army', pp. 67, 69-70.

effort to both understand the new form of warfare and gather support for the army Mao's book on popular warfare was translated as were Che Guevara's works and everything else the Army could find on these topics.

This argument made limited war, and by extension guerrilla and insurgency, more attractive for the Army than conventional warfare. A major conventional war would have involved nuclear weapons anyway lending support to Air Force arguments against extensive ground operations. Yet the Army was keen on exploiting the perception that under a strategic doctrine of massive retaliation and the consequent overreliance of American forces on nuclear weapons, guerrilla and partisan warfare would have become the weapon of choice of America's enemies especially in areas where, by admission of the administration itself, no vital national interest was threatened. Suddenly, guerrilla warfare was promoted from being an important but unwanted addition to the conventional mission to a vehicle to support the idea of a stronger army.

The Army had already admitted impotence outside Europe and Korea when Lieutenant General James Gavin, then Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, had opposed intervention on behalf of the French forces in Indochina in 1954 on the grounds that there were not enough men and equipment for such an operation.⁸⁹ Gavin's successors, Ridgway and Taylor used limited war to support the Army battle for money. General Maxwell Taylor was the first leading figure from the army to see the potential benefit of exploiting what was then called

⁸⁹ In 1954, out of a total of 1,404,598 of officers and enlisted men in the US Army only 739,806 were available on the United States, including training and support units. Those units were short on tanks, armored vehicles and artillery.

limited for the benefit of survival and expansion. To be ready to deter and fight limited wars the army needed more weapons, more troops, and, most of all, a stronger budget. So in the era of the New Look, the Army wed itself to the idea of limited war in an act of self-preservation and to make itself a stronger contender in the budgetary battle.

Historians and commentators have repeatedly pointed out that this 'alliance' between the Army and limited war had been born out of convenience and was made only on a superficial level. Certainly, shaping the army for unconventional warfare, or at least appearing to do so, was seen not only as an immediate answer to real contingencies but as a way to present the Army as a new and modern force to the public. For this school of thought the main objective of the army until 1960 was not deterring or fighting war but preserving its own existence. As many authors have pointed out the Army did not transform itself into a counterinsurgency force during this period; on the contrary, the majority of the improvements seemed to be directed at preparing to fight a conventional war in Germany.⁹⁰

In reality, the situation was much more complex. In the years of the Eisenhower administration the Army struggled with limited budget, inferior equipment and doctrinal debates, often about theoretical utilization of weapons systems still on the drawing boards.⁹¹ The structural changes made were in the context of larger war and in the integration of nuclear weapons in tactical and operational

⁹⁰ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1986), p 5-6; Trauschweizer, 'US Army' pp. 106-113, 321-232.

⁹¹ Trauschweizer, 'US Army', pp. 48-58, 67-68.

warfare such as the adoption of the clumsy PENTOMIC infantry division structure.⁹²

Furthermore, the Army never clarified what it meant as limited war. Limited war was used to cover everything from a major conflict in Germany without the use of strategic nuclear weapons to low level insurgencies. Even the terms linked to unconventional warfare changed usage during the period.⁹³

While every major equipment program suffered delays and cost increases and was fielded in insufficient numbers, counterinsurgency and warfare outside Europe received more and more attention.⁹⁴

In the later years of its second mandate, the Eisenhower administration followed suit, especially after the Lebanon intervention. While budget restrictions were still in place, the Army was again allowed to think about fighting insurgencies and slowly but steadily advisory commitments were expanded. In the same period Army Chief of Staff General George H. Decker supported the creation of Cold War Task Forces.⁹⁵ These were essentially divisional size units including an

⁹² The PENTOMIC (PENTagonal atOMIC) division can be summarized as an attempt to preserve and increase the combat power of infantry divisions in time of budgetary restriction at the expense of support and command element while and increasing the formation flexibility. It was also a tool to present the army as a new a modern force and help weapon procurement. In the end the removal of support and command element reduced flexibility, equipment was always in short supply and the organization itself was unwieldy and of difficult control placing too much responsibility and troops under relatively junior officers. Trauschweizer, 'US Army', pp. 54-57 and 81-113.

⁹³ Metzgar, 'Unconventional Warfare', pp 18-23.

⁹⁴ The history of the two major vehicle systems of the period the M48 Medium Gun Tank and the M113 Armoured Personnel Carrier is typical. Even if they were low complexity projects their development hit a series of problems delaying their effective deployment in reasonable numbers. Initial production batches of the M48 tanks were even deemed unsuitable for combat due to armour problems and lack of range-finding equipment

⁹⁵ George H. Decker (1902-1980) US army Chief of Staff from 1960 to 1962. His only exposure to unconventional operations was in 1957-1959 as Commander UN Forces Korea and Commander 8th US Army Korea. Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 329-334

Airborne Brigade, a Special Forces Group and several civil affairs, engineering and military police rounded out by an aviation unit to provide mobility and support. They were designed to be tied to specific geographical areas and to be staffed with personnel fluent in foreign languages and local customs. In the end those units never materialized and were replaced, first, by smaller Special Action Forces centered only on Special Forces personnel and, later, supported by a back-up conventional brigade.⁹⁶

Also, despite the strong objections of the State Department and the fear from several officers that civic action would have hampered training, the Army role in overseas aid programs was expanded. In the 1959 National Security Act the army was encouraged to participate in economic support programs overseas, and, in May 1960, the Administration gave the army limited authority to promote and launch those programs.

The sources of counterinsurgency doctrine changed as well. Korea and the German experiences on the Eastern Front were steadily replaced by 'contemporary' subjects. The main case studies were the Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines, the British experience in Malaya and the French operations in both Indochina and Algeria. The Army wanted to present its doctrine as the forefront of the anticommunist drive and furthermore, also, political science theories from academic circles started to be incorporated in the Army thinking. Communist insurgency was considered something special, without any previous connections or precedents. To be ready for the new challenges the Army had to

⁹⁶ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 247, 198-199; FM 31-22 *US Army Counterinsurgency Forces*, 1963.

acquaint itself with the battles against communist insurgencies then being fought, and, more importantly, those that were perceived as successful.

Strategically and operationally the French experience in Indochina was considered a negative example, and French tactics and strategy in this area were highly criticized usually along the lines that the French had tried to adopt conventional tactics against a guerrilla force or that they were never able to concentrate their forces in sufficient strength to be decisive on the battlefield. Dispersal of forces in static security missions was highly criticized. American manuals stressed the need for taking the offensive against guerrillas and keeping the initiative. Politically, French strategy was blamed for not having been able to prevent the political struggle arising from a failure to grant significant reforms. French experience in Indochina was never deeply researched. Instead of relying on the handful of American advisors and on the mass of reports the French Army had provided to the US Army, it was viewed more through the medium of Bernard Fall's reports and books, sources highly critical of French experiences and often not fully objective or accurate.⁹⁷

On the opposite side, French tactics in Algeria were praised as successful and the war was subjected to a massive scrutiny. French officers, including Colonels Roger Trinquier and even Colonel, later General, Paul Aussaresses, were invited to the United States and worked closely with both the Special Forces community and the Army school system.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 230.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 230.

The other two major case studies were the Philippines and Malaya. Those two received even more attention because they involved English speaking forces, American advisors (in the case of the Philippines), and were both closer to American interests and fears.

While not strictly an American operation (due to the Korean War and a policy decision that no US troops were to be directly involved), the 1946-1955 Hukbalahap insurrection was considered particularly relevant because, after the initial failures of the Philippine forces to contain or reduce the rebellion, operations were conducted in accordance of the FM 31-20 principles. The Philippine Army was strengthened, retrained, and aggressive operations were conducted on the field. At the political and administrative level efforts were made to remove the grievances of the peasant population that were fuelling the rebellion. It was considered a textbook case. Everything from the Philippines seemed to support FM 31-20's theories about guerrilla warfare and the emerging social and economic theories about the underlying reasons behind insurgency. The increased successes of government forces after economic and political conditions were improved in the areas affected by the insurgency were considered proof of the effectiveness of the theory.⁹⁹

But the conflict that attracted the most interest was Malaya. Clearly the communist insurrection in Malaya had several key points. It was a communist insurrection, it involved America's closest ally, it had a mix of civic action, population control and military operations, and, more importantly, British and

⁹⁹ Lawrence, Greenberg , *The Hukbalahap Insurrection* (Washington: US Army, 1987) pp. 110-111, 133; Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 229-230.

Commonwealth forces were highly successful in defeating it. Material from British sources and American military and diplomatic personnel stationed there flowed back to United States. The manual crafted by the British Army for its units involved in the 'Malayan Emergency' quickly became required reading for US Army officers. Malayan lessons also formed the basis of the doctrine in the following period when COIN became the centrepiece of Army and National Security Doctrine.

1.5 COIN Doctrine 1960-1965

The work produced by the army during the last years of Eisenhower's presidency bore fruit at the start of the subsequent administration. In 1961, just four months after John Kennedy took office, the Army published its 1961 FM 31-15: *Operations Against Irregular Forces*. While on the surface the manual was nothing more than a re-iteration of the previous FM 31-20 and 31-21, it was a full-fledged manual addressing counterinsurgency from both strategic and operational standpoints. Civic action, police operations, and political activity had the same coverage in the manual as did combat operations. The basic tenet of the manual was that:

an irregular force is the outward manifestation of a resistance movement against the local government by some portion of the population of an area. Therefore the growth and continuation of an irregular force is dependent

by the support furnished by the population even though the irregular force also receives support from an external power.¹⁰⁰

The concept had already been expressed in FM 31-20, but here it was expressed in a clearer fashion and the manual identified several weaknesses in current Army structures and operations. Also, the new manual criticized existing doctrine and identified several shortcomings that had to be addressed in the existing Army organization and practice. It called for flexible organizations, dispersal of firepower and, a first, clear predominance of civil over military measures in combating insurgencies. It also started the distinction between counterinsurgency and counter guerrilla, a distinction fully explained in FM 31-16 *Counter Guerrilla Operations*. From now on counterinsurgency was the complete embodiment of all measures, political, economic, police and military, relevant to combating insurgency. Counter guerrilla was the definition of combat operations against irregular forces.

The subsequent year, 1962, the concept became part of the first major administration-wide document concerning how to fight insurgencies, the Overseas Internal Defence Policy plan (OIDP). The plan put Walt Rostow's modernization theory at the central stage of counterinsurgency. The basic assumption was that communism was exploiting the sensible grievances of people in underdeveloped countries against social inequalities and bad governance. To stop the spread of communism those societies had to be modernized and improved through external assistance.¹⁰¹ The plan also

¹⁰⁰ FM 31-15 (1961), pp. 3-4.

¹⁰¹ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 224, 238.

accepted the Army's practical approach on counter guerrilla operations. The document stressed the importance of political and economic measures over military ones, but at the same time it was clear that counter guerrilla operations were still an important part of American overseas commitment. Furthermore it instructed the Army to develop doctrine for all armed services as far as counterinsurgency was concerned.

OIDP became the administration blueprint for COIN operations. After the publication of the OIDP, the Army launched a major effort to revise all its training manuals and school curricula to emphasize the criticality of COIN. Initially the President was critical of the Army methods and dissatisfied over what he thought was an half-hearted effort to respond to his orders, but when General Decker's training program finally shifted into full gear he was satisfied with the results.

The problem was that, even after the publication of OIDP, COIN studies were largely confined to the Army with civilian agencies unwilling to be fully committed to the aggressive direct action measures the President favoured.¹⁰² Even if the document endorsed the Army's requests for unity of effort and command, it was unable to chart a clear command relationship between the various government agencies.

Overall the Army appeared satisfied with the change in national policy of the new administration. Much more dangerous were the internal problems in writing and disseminating doctrine. The Special Forces resented the intrusion of

¹⁰² Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 278.

conventional Army commands into a realm they considered their own. Often the revision of tactical manuals was uneven and disorganized. One thing that the Army as a whole considered as clear was that, at the tactical level, the task of soldiers was not different from that required by conventional warfare. Small unit tactics, marksmanship, night operations and patrolling, and small unit leadership skills were already stressed in Army training. That was the reason why several Army officers claimed that American soldiers did not require special training for insurgencies. But the majority of the officers were at the same time complaining that current doctrine and higher level organizations were not suited to COIN.

General Decker was concerned that the Army force structure was not suited for anything but conventional and nuclear warfare. The Army was also not considered the best choice to foster social engineering programs in third world countries.

The Army's purpose was to meet clearly-defined, large-scale military threats. Obviously these units are not a proper response to a band of guerrillas which, in a flash, will transform itself into a scattering of 'farmers.'¹⁰³

Everyone in the Army seemed to eschew direct commitment of combat forces to missions other than full-fledged combat operations. While the orthodox school had always presented this reluctance as a sign the Army was not interested in COIN, the truth was that it realized that any infusion of major combat troops in an underdeveloped allied country could have spelled doom for the government

¹⁰³ Quoted from Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 225.

they were supposed to save. Recourse to American combat forces was also considered the last resort by Army planners for the reasons summarized by General Decker. To redress this shortcoming, Decker proposed the expansion of Special Forces and the creation of several 'back up' units to support America's cold war commitments. Yet Decker's solution was not in line with the administration's hopes. The administration wanted to transform the Army into a fully-fledged and 'politically-savvy' counter-guerrilla force.¹⁰⁴ Decker was thus replaced in 1962.

Still, Decker was not alone in supporting the view that the Army had no reason to transform itself to the extent desired by the administration. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Lemnitzer, Kennedy's special advisor for military issues, Maxwell Taylor, and even the man who was considered the most ardent proponent of COIN theory in the armed forces, USMC General Victor H. Krulak, shared Decker's view: regular soldiers, if properly trained, were able to handle any guerrilla in the world. The administration's views of a complete transformation were supported at least by the head of the Special Warfare Center, General William P. Yarborough, and the special assistant to the Army Chief of Staff, General William B. Rosson.

After Generals Decker and Lemnitzer retired and General Taylor was appointed to replace Lemnitzer, General Krulak's influence with the administration increased. This seems to support the contention that the Kennedy administration was re-evaluating its approach to the Army's COIN role. Decker's

¹⁰⁴ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 226.

successors, Generals Earle Wheeler and Harold K. Johnson, supervised the full implementation of ODP first in Army doctrine and then in Army training.¹⁰⁵ During their tenure, COIN related classes and subject matter were introduced or expanded in all service schools and at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

1.6 Counterinsurgency doctrine evaluated

Thus, despite what has been written on the US Army COIN approach after Vietnam, the Army was not only deeply interested in COIN it was practicing and studying it wholeheartedly and not responding to direction from the civilian leadership. As Andrew Birtle pointed out, the importance of the COIN drive during Kennedy's presidency 'stemmed from the fact that it imposed on the military services a doctrinal vision that was virtually identical to the views already held by the Army.'¹⁰⁶

In 1964 the US Army was apparently well prepared as far as counterinsurgency was concerned. The expansion of manpower and equipment of the Kennedy years gave the Army the practical means to directly tackle insurgencies on the ground while, on a theoretical level, it benefited from at least 20 years of almost uninterrupted thinking on insurgency and on the means to stop it. The Army fully recognized the political nature of insurgencies and approached them with an integrated military-political approach. This approach had been tested on the

¹⁰⁵ Earle Wheeler (1908-1975) served as Army Chief of staff from 1962 to 1964, then as Chairman of JCS until 1970. Harold K Johnson, (1912-1983) served in World War 2 and Korea. He was Chief of Staff of the Army from 1964 to 1968

¹⁰⁶ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 238.

field and in several exercises. Yet there were several problems. Some were due to the nature of insurgency itself while others were due to the Army's own strategic culture.

While recognizing the need for a political approach, the Army was powerless as it still styled itself as a non-political entity, and its previous attempts to introduce political consciousness in the officer corps had met both internal rejection and external opposition.¹⁰⁷ Also, after 1941, the Army was in a clear position of subordination to civilian authority overseas with the exclusion of Korea and Japan. That meant that, while recognizing the need for political actions to address the root of insurgencies, it was not able to cope with them. Despite the efforts of the Kennedy administration to create a unified environment for counterinsurgency, the various military and non-military agencies were still deeply divided and uncooperative. When the Army intervened directly in the Dominican Republic in 1965, State Department officials and military commanders on the spot were still at odds. Army recommendations that local military commanders receive mission based orders and be given freedom of action in the theatre were never fully implemented.

The proliferation of civilian agencies given the task of fighting the spread of communist insurgencies in the world was creating a confused chain of command. While national command authorities recognized the need for integration and coordination, even the ODP failed in creating an effective joint effort. One of the

¹⁰⁷ When the Army tried to set up a school for military government officers in 1942 its attempt had been strongly criticized both by the press and by several government civilian agencies and was a short lived experiment. Yet the attempt to introduce civil administration in occupied territories in North Africa was considered a failure; Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 13-14.

key tenets of Army counterinsurgency doctrine was practically removed before even being put to test. While everyone recognized the necessity for a unified command, no one wanted to give away their own authority. Unity of command was also a moot point because it never addressed the fact that, according to the stated doctrine of every American administration from Truman to Kennedy, American forces would have only advised and not intervened in internal insurgencies. Even if American doctrine was centred on a reform based approach designed to remove the root of insurgency from a given country, it was supposed to be implemented by friendly, autonomous governments to protect themselves. Thus neither the Army nor the State Department had any real control over these governments. Even if the ODP recognized the problem it was unable to address it. Its proposed solutions, enforcing American will with cuts in aid or using covert action to remove un-compliant governments, were extreme and in direct conflict with the need to provide stable institutions and continuity in COIN effort. The truth was that Nationalist China, South Korea, Greece, the Philippines and South Vietnam all failed in implementing real reforms relying instead much more on coercion than persuasion to fight their insurgencies. Even the “fabled” Ramon Magyagsay in the Philippines created a reform program that was more superficial than effective and didn’t remove the deep root of instability in the archipelago.¹⁰⁸

The political part of Army doctrine was clearly outside the Army’s own span of control. The tactical and operational measures were another matter. On those issues, the Army opted for an evolutionary approach. It used the tactics that had

¹⁰⁸ Birtle, ‘Counterinsurgency’, p. 65.

been successfully employed from 1941 onwards while always trying to keep abreast with field practices of allied nations and new technologies. Of course it relied only on “successful” operations, and what was deemed successful or not by the Army can be subjected to further debate. The root of tactical operations was based on the German operational model from World War II. American experiences in Korea and data gathered from the earlier advisory missions were added when the army first codified COIN operations with FM 30-20. British experiences in Malaya were then added in the Sixties. What is interesting is that, in the later part of the period considered, American experiences in Korea had much less impact than campaigns waged by allied powers like the United Kingdom and France.

An additional issue was not related to the actual doctrine but to what exactly doctrine meant for the Army. Was it a simple, general, guideline allowing latitude in the conduct of specific operations to local commanders or a complex prescription designed to solve all problems and to be rigidly applied?

For Generals Lemnitzer and Johnson apparently COIN doctrine had to be all encompassing and prescriptive. They wanted doctrine to cover all aspects as well as all potential geographical areas; for General Bruce Palmer it had only to chart a general course and provide guidance.¹⁰⁹ Certainly FM 30-20 was meant to be used as a guide rather than a prescription. On almost every page the reader was cautioned to adapt tactics and strategy to the situation. In FM 31-15 doctrine

¹⁰⁹ Memo, LT Gen. Palmer for CSA, c. 1965, sub: study on Lower Spectrum Conflict; STUDY, DCSOPS, 1965, sub: A Worldwide Integral National Strategy for 1970, pt. II, p. 21. 68A2344, RG 319, NARA.

was much more prescriptive. Especially after the adoption of the modernization theory as official administration policy with the ODP document, the entire high level approach was fixed in a single and largely unproven principle. Also several problems emerged when doctrine was implemented in training. Notwithstanding the smaller one day exercise designed to teach the various basic counter-guerrilla procedures, the Army embarked on an ambitious program of large brigade and division sized field exercises both in the Continental United States and allied countries. These field exercises were held in military reservations with the full participation of civilian communities over several weeks. The entire spectrum of the new doctrine was tested, from counter-guerrilla actions to counterinsurgency approaches based on civic action and political activities. During those exercises several problems emerged. Despite the occasions where Army civic activities were unable to sway the local population for several reasons, not least the fact that civilians were finding supporting the guerrillas more fun than supporting the 'government' players, the prescribed persuasive approach rarely worked. In the words of a 2nd Infantry Division report in 1964: 'civic affairs production were well attended and politely applauded, but they did not change the basic loyalty of anyone.'¹¹⁰

While both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were increasingly satisfied with progress in counterinsurgency, the Army was certainly not. According to the special commission established by President Johnson to review Army progress in counterinsurgency, the Army was the only federal agency that had developed a

¹¹⁰ Rast, James, 'Highland fox: The 2d Division Off-Post Counterinsurgency Exercise' in *Infantry* 55, May-June 1965 45-49

COIN doctrine, and only the Army and Marine Corps had implemented a training program to disseminate that doctrine.¹¹¹ Certainly, the fact that only the Army had taken COIN seriously while the ODIP stressed the need for inter-agency cooperation as well as indicating military measures were not the main part of American approach to stopping insurgencies, cast a long shadow over the entire effort. Also several officers were dubious about what doctrine called for when confronting the third phase of popular warfare.¹¹² Doctrine and even its critics were unclear on this point. The Army recognized that a problem could have developed. On one hand they consider the emergence of conventional operations a positive thing because it would have exposed insurgents to conventional tactics:

On the other hand, if the guerrillas remained dispersed to avoid battle but concentrate sufficiently to cause severe government attrition, the government faces a dilemma. Concentration of government forces permit the spread of insurgent control to those areas where government strength has been reduced. Conversely failure to concentrate invites piecemeal destruction.¹¹³

Yet recognizing the dilemma was not the same as finding a solution. When the Combat Development Command raised the issue, the Special Warfare and Civil Affairs Group's only answer was to increase the combination of civic actions, police control and military pressure and localize it to areas critical for

¹¹¹ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 278; Report, Counterinsurgency Review Board, 1st Dec 65. For a critique of USMC approach to COIN training see chapter 2.

¹¹² Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp.254-256

¹¹³ CDC, special Warfare and Special Affairs Group Concepts and General Doctrine for Counterinsurgency, July 1965, p. 98 CDC, RG338 NARA.

government survival. If that was not sufficient, sealing borders to deprive insurgents of external support and combat operations of regular units backed by artillery and airpower would have restored the situation.

Clearly the Army's evaluation was that the Maoist popular warfare model, despite being divided into three phases, was all based on the same concept. It was more a matter of escalation rather than changing conditions. The doctrinal answer was counter escalation: more reforms, more civic action, more police efforts and more patrolling. In case the enemy resorted to full scale combat operations, the situation would have escalated to the point where conventional tactics and operations would have been conducted. The Army never produced a Field Manual for Division level operations involving counterinsurgency. COIN operations stopped at brigade level.

Clearly the Army's strategic culture failed to adapt, or even foresee, a situation where the enemy could have employed both conventional warfare and insurgency at the same time. During its entire history, the United States Army has faced one or the other, rarely both together. Even in the Philippines the Army faced conventional warfare first, then, after having destroyed the enemy's main army, a guerrilla uprising. Of course historians could have pointed out that the Continental Army did exactly that to the British forces in North America especially during Cornwallis' southern campaign, but, in the 1965 Army, the strategic culture was not overly keen on history. Historical examples used in crafting doctrine were limited to contemporary operations, and even these operations were part of a limited group. Only the Malayan Emergency and

Philippine Hukbalahap rebellion were used extensively. Korea, Greece and China disappeared. The main point was that everything not connected to the Maoist popular warfare model was ignored. The Army's strategic culture in the Fifties and the Sixties was deeply linked to political threats and not only military ones. The Army was keen on the dangers posed by communism and its expansion. It was both a real threat and a necessity in the political climate after 1945.

If the Army wanted to survive as an independent institution, it had to present itself as a bulwark against communism.

If the Army wanted to survive in the field, it had to counteract both the threat of a Soviet armoured thrust in Germany and of insurgencies everywhere. Still, while the Army embraced both the conventional and unconventional threat by fully immersing itself in the study of these threats, it did that through the prism of its somewhat limited strategic culture. It has been argued that the US Army doctrine had been deeply rooted in German military thinking. In producing a COIN doctrine the Army used the Prussian and German military approach. Doctrine had to be the definitive and perfect solution. General Johnson's quest for the perfect doctrine is the clear example of that. Still, even a study commissioned by Johnson himself to evaluate COIN doctrine called into serious question the validity of the attempt 'to devise a universal doctrine for counterinsurgency comparable to our conventional war doctrine.'¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴Study DCSOPS, 1965, sub: A Worldwide National Integral Strategy for 1970, pt II, p. 21, RG319, NARA.

On the eve of its full commitment to Vietnam, the Army had appreciated the main factor in both insurgency and counterinsurgency, and it could also claim to have been involved in at least three major successful counterinsurgency campaigns. Yet it had completed a doctrine with two major flaws. First, it was based on an integrated multi-agency approach where several agencies, both federal and foreign, would have to play an important part; second, even if the Army had clearly recognized the dangers of the three phases of a traditional Maoist people's war, it had no real answer if any insurgency was not stopped in phase one or two. Differently from what has been argued by Krepinevich, Lewy, and, recently, Nagl, the Army was ready to face an insurgency or conventional war, but rarely both at the same time.

Chapter 2: USMC and counterinsurgency 1945-1963

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present an overview of the US Marine Corps approach to counterinsurgency warfare and their doctrinal outlook before the actual intervention in Vietnam. This is a difficult task for several reasons.

First, there is a lingering assumption that Marine operations were indeed different from those the Army conducted. Several authors have expressed the view that even if ultimately unsuccessful the Marines were fighting a different war in their area of responsibility. This interpretation is based on the ideas that the Marine Corps was better trained and schooled in counterinsurgency than the Army, and its doctrine was more effective in such an environment.¹¹⁵

This view has become the official one for the US Marine Corps. Several pamphlets and monographs authored by Marine officers discussing counterinsurgency in the current War on Terror environment restated this official line.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Indeed according to a 1963 conversation between General Wallace M. Green, Commandant USMC, and General Edward H. Forney, USMC (ret) any eventual marine mission in Vietnam would involve civil action or counterinsurgency. Exchange as such as this tended to create the idea the USMC was indeed ready and fully trained for counterinsurgency missions. Copy of personal Letter from Lt. General Greene to Maj. General Richard G. Weede, dated 27 February 1963, General Wallace M. Greene personal papers, USMC History and Museum Division. Oscar Gilbert, *The US Marine Corps in the Vietnam War*, (Osprey: Oxford, 2006), p. 15.

¹¹⁶ Eugene Winn, *Did the Marines Better Understand the Nature of the Vietnam Conflict and Was the Combined Action Program More Suitable than Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support in Dealing With Insurgents?* (PhD thesis CSC, 2000); Brooks Brevington, *Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement* (PhD thesis CSC 1996), Curtis Williamson III, *The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP): A Proposed Alternative Strategy for the Vietnam War*. (PhD Thesis CSC 2002). All those authors centred thesis analysis on the basis that the war in Vietnam was a pure insurgency and that the CAP project was the key in 'winning' it. Yet Brooks admit that objectively the contention cannot be proved, even if subjectively he strongly supports it. All those papers have been produced by USMC officer for USMC consumption.

It is beyond doubt that USMC experience in counterinsurgency, counter-guerrilla and police operations before the deployment of major combat units to South Vietnam in 1965 was substantial. Also beyond doubt is that this experience was out of date. The interventions in the Philippines, China and, more importantly, in the various Central American and Caribbean ‘banana wars’ had all occurred between 1899 and 1932. The last intervention, Nicaragua, was criticized by the Army for neglecting the civic action side of the intervention and not pushing road building, educational, medical and related programs as far as possible.¹¹⁷ Operations in the Philippines, China and in the Caribbean were not the exclusive domain of the Marine Corps. The pacification of the Philippines was an Army controlled campaign. An Army unit operated in Shanghai during the first crisis in that city in 1932, and, finally, the US Army led the Intervention in Cuba in 1906-1909. The Marine Corps histories also tend to dismiss the US Army experience in guerrilla fighting. The Army was active in both the Philippines against the Japanese occupation and against communist guerrillas in Greece and Korea from 1945 to 1960.

The idea of Marine pre-eminence in COIN relies on the codification of the Corps “constabulary” experience in the famous and often quoted “Small Wars Manual”. However, this manual was not reissued after its 1940 edition until well after the period under discussion here, in 1986. The US Army, on the other hand, had crafted, published and disseminated several iterations of its own COIN doctrine between 1940 and 1965. Those authors which claim Marine Corps pre-eminence

¹¹⁷ A.J. Bacevich, *Diplomat in Khaki* (Lawrence: Kansas, 1989), pp. 129, 131; Keith Bickel, *Mars Learning*, (Westview: Boulder: 2001), p. 165.

in COIN doctrine tend to ignore these early Army manuals. The Army officers involved in preparing these papers often worked in conjunction with the same Marine officers writing the “Small Wars Manual”. Yet the connection between the pre-war writings and the cold war USMC has yet to be accepted.

The last contention is more easily supported since several key figures involved in the US Marine Corps’ COIN effort in Vietnam had previous experience in the years of the “Banana Wars”. Several key figures such as the Corps commandant, General Wallace Greene, the first commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force in Vietnam, General Lewis Walt, and the foremost Marine expert in counterinsurgency, General Victor “Brute” Krulak, had experience in those operations before World War Two.¹¹⁸ In the case of Walt, there is a direct connection between him and Colonel, later General, Evans F. Carlson, one of the officers behind the Small Wars Manual.¹¹⁹

Yet there are several problems in accepting at face value the USMC claims about its own proficiency in COIN missions. There is no documentary evidence to support the contention that the USMC followed its own lead in those operations after the end of the Second World War. There is instead direct evidence that,

¹¹⁸ Wallace M. Greene (1907-2003), commandant of the corps from 1963 to 1976, besides having been the operations officer of the 2nd Marine Division during the invasion of the Marianna Islands, had served in China between 1937 and 1939. Lewis W. Walt (1913-1989) held company and battalion commands in World War Two, but also served in Shanghai between 1937 and 1938. Victor H. Krulak (1913-2008) was the commander of Fleet Marine Force Pacific from 1964 to 1968 and from 1962 to 1964 he was the Special Assistant for Counter Insurgency Activities for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

¹¹⁹ Evans F. Carlson (1896-1947), famous for his activities as commander of the USMC 2nd Raider Battalion at Makin and Guadalcanal, but before the war he served three tours in China. He observed Japanese and Chinese operations, including communist ones and he got acquainted with Mao and the other leader of the communist movement there. From 1930 to 1933 served in Nicaragua with the local constabulary force. After his return from Nicaragua he was in touch with the officers who were then working to create the Small Wars Manual.

even when its school systems were actively working on the “Small Wars” issue, the leadership was debating the usefulness of the “Small Wars” and its relation to the USMC mission.¹²⁰ When, in 1945, the USMC school system was fully reactivated following the temporary closure and reorganization in the 1942-1944 period, ‘Small Wars’ were completely absent from the curriculum.¹²¹ When the Marines held an internal strategic debate after the Korean conflict it was not about the essence of the mission but on what was the best way to implement their amphibious assault role. The essence of the debate was whether to focus on conventional amphibious assaults or to integrate the new and promising helicopter technology in the amphibious mission.¹²² As it will be shown the latter approach was favoured because the Corps was facing the competition of the US Army that was developing its similar Strategic Army Corps (STRAC) concept at the same time. The resulting need to develop and expand the airmobile approach not only drained intellectual resources but also limited financial ones thus leaving few resources for alternative projects. As it will be seen, the infatuation with air mobility not only precluded the development of an internal COIN approach but compromised existing equipment and training. It was only with the advent of the Kennedy administration and the new national strategy that the situation started to change.

¹²⁰ Bickel, ‘Mars’ pp. 211-213; Allan Millett, *Semper Fidelis* (Free Press: New York, 1991), pp. 329-333, 335-336.

¹²¹ Donald Bittner, *Curriculum Evolution Marine Corps Command and Staff College 1920-1988*, (USMC History Division: Washington 1988) p. 38.

¹²² Bittner, ‘Curriculum Evolution’, p. VIII; Eugene Rawlins, *Marines and Helicopters 1946-1962*, (USMC History Division, Washington 1967) for a complete history of USMC helicopter developments.

Even the Marine Corps' own documentation strongly suggests that as an organization the USMC in 1963-65 was following Army doctrine and approach for including counterinsurgency operations.¹²³ This chapter will chronicle how the Marine Corps transformed itself from a COIN oriented organization to a fully conventional force.

2.2 US Marine Corps Approach to Doctrine

The first point to be addressed before describing Marine doctrine is to underline the differences in the role doctrine played in the Corps compared to the role it played in the Army. In the US Army doctrine was all encompassing and prescriptive while the Marines had a different approach to it. There were several reasons for this difference some cultural some of which are historical and some practical. For Marines doctrine was not meant to be "a set of rules" but more of a guide that 'allowed for the infinite variety of conditions and situations characteristic of human affairs.'¹²⁴

In practical and general terms US Army doctrine was meant to be a set of instruction on how subordinate officers have to operate on the battlefield. According to some sources US Army subordinate officers were, and today still are, expected to follow their commanders' orders without improvisation.¹²⁵ Doctrine is thus intended to provide a common procedure to solve tactical, operational and strategic problems. Despite its long tradition of Indian warfare

¹²³ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 237-238.

¹²⁴ Paul Herbert, , *Toward the Best Available Thought*, (Ph.D dissertation Ohio State University 1985), pp. 122-123.

¹²⁵ Bickel, 'Mars', p. 4.

and its constabulary role US Army doctrine, particularly since 1917, had always been centred in fighting large battles or participating in large scale operations. Larger operations had traditionally required a large degree of coordination and centralized control. This had been true for the majority of the Army existence as a coherent organization.

The USMC, instead, had a different historical approach to operations. Traditionally, Marines had always operated in small detachments often under relatively junior officers and separated by long distance with inherent communications delay from superior commanders. While the Army had used corps sized formations since the Civil War, the first USMC corps sized organization was fielded only in 1942. Officers thus had to show a greater degree of initiative in disparate situations. The consequence was that when doctrine was codified, it was designed to provide a tool for subordinate officers to better understand the aim of their superiors' intent. Doctrine was thus meant more as a broad guide than a precise and detailed prescription. Junior USMC officers were expected to show initiative in implementing their commanders' intention and were, supposedly, thoroughly trained to show that initiative. USMC units involved on constabulary operations or opposed landings had often found themselves cut off from the normal chain of command. Sometimes casualties in command echelons required lower ranking officers or senior NCOs to step forward and take command. Marine doctrine writers had always been aware of these factors and structured their writing with these assumptions in mind. This approach was aided by the relatively small size of the USMC. At its largest the

Corps only ever consisted of six combat divisions. Furthermore, divisions as an organisational unit were introduced only in 1941. Post Korean War the entire force numbered only four combat divisions, three active and one reserve. Reduced numbers allowed officers to be produced by a single school system rather than coming from different schools and curricula as was the case for the Army. USMC officers had at least the shared benefits of attending the same basic officer school.

While the US Army experienced a massive turnover of personnel during and after the Second World War, the USMC maintained a core of pre-war officers that rose steadily in the ranks. If some of them were definitely linked to the amphibious warfare ideas, others had been schooled, through personal experiences or training, in small wars. The provision for flexibility and initiative offered by the Corps strategic culture allowed those personalities, when called upon to provide solutions for the ever increasing commitment in Vietnam, to craft their answers based on their previous experience, but they did not do so in a framework of organized doctrine.

The approach of Generals Greene, Krulak and Walt to Vietnam will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 4. This chapter will explore the doctrinal and strategic outlook of the USMC from 1940 to 1965 and the role that different personalities had in the development of that outlook.

2.2 Post War doctrine

At the conclusion of the conflict in the Pacific and following the drawdown of American forces, the US Marine Corps was forced to refocus its role. Before 1939 the Marines were, apparently, mainly concerned with the small intervention operations, but between 1940 and 1945 the Corps had evolved in the premier amphibious assault force. When, the Command and Staff School in Quantico reopened in 1945 after having been closed in 1941, small wars and guerrilla topics were not included in its curriculum. Interestingly enough, the School was then re-designated 'Amphibious Warfare School, Senior Course.' The mission was:

To train field grade officers for command and staff duties in appropriate echelons of command within the Fleet Marine Force with primary emphasis on advanced instruction in the doctrine and techniques of amphibious warfare.¹²⁶

Obviously debates surrounding the school system quickly resumed. But this time they were not concerned about the strategic mission. After having brushed aside ideas of returning the USMC to its role of colonial police or becoming a sort of 'United Nations police force', the focus of the debates was amphibious assault.¹²⁷ First the debate was on the relative importance of practical versus theoretical teaching in the school systems. After the conclusion of the Korean

¹²⁶ Bittner, 'Curriculum Evolution', p, 37.

¹²⁷ Bittner, 'Curriculum Evolution', pp 37-40; Millett, 'Semper Fi', pp. 451-454.

conflict, the debate shifted to the most effective means to land ashore: conventional beach assaults or the new vertical envelopment techniques using aircraft and helicopters.

The focus of the school and, by extension, the mission of the entire US Marine Corps was amphibious warfare in one form or another. This point was never questioned. While the entire reason for the existence of conventional forces was questioned in light of the seemingly decisive dominance of airpower and nuclear weapons, the ability to present a coherent and definite mission was an important asset in the battle for survival that the different armed forces waged between 1945 and 1960.

Like the other services, the USMC faced a battle to secure funding. The Army opposed funding to the US Air Force and Marines because of perceived mission overlap. The Marines were assisted in this competition for scarce resources by their close alliance with the Navy. The amphibious assault concept was instrumental to meet operational realities, US Navy needs and, last but not least, in creating a strong public image for the Corps. All these were important political assets.

While at the same time the US Army was debating its post-war mission and defending its role, the Marines were not only presenting a strong mission to the public they were also able to do this with the support from the US Navy hierarchy. If the Army mission was not well defined, the USMC's was clear and simple. The Corps had always been more proficient at public relations than the Army. The ability of the Marines to produce a strong image was also aided by

iconic photographs like the flag raising on Iwo Jima and the tales of 'uncommon valour' against the Japanese. Korea only reinforced this image. Marine publicists were keen on pointing how the US Army experienced difficulties in deploying combined arms forces from Japan or continental US, while the USMC was able to quickly deploy a full and effective force integrating infantry, armoured and air elements.

The public image of the Corps was also exploiting the fact that the Marines were providing unique capability and expertise. While beach assaults were not an exclusive Marines preserve, the Marines developed an effective advertising campaign based on these operations. Feature movies, documentaries and books focused on showcasing the unique nature of the US Marines Corps. The message presented to the public at large was simple and clear: due to their unique expertise the Marines would have been the first line of defence by landing on friendly or enemy beaches shipped directly from the United States with the support of the US Navy.

The same expertise enabled the US Navy to extend its reach worldwide without needing expensive bases in foreign territory.

While the US Air Force was now a separate service from the US Army, they were also now competing for their slice of the defence budget. The Navy and the Marines were presenting a united front thus making their own requests stronger. This was not always sufficient to ensure victory in the budgetary wars as in the

case of the scrapping of the *USS United States* in 1949. The so called 'revolt of the admirals' in the same year, showed that the political clout wielded by the US Navy-US Marine 'alliance' was considerable and probably superior to the one wielded by the other services.

2.3 Amphibious Assault and Air-mobility

The Marines had first experimented with helicopters in the later Forties. In Korea, the service pioneered the use of helicopters in support and combat operations. After Korea, helicopters and air-mobility became a prominent topic in high level discussions about the future of the USMC mission. The experiments in Korea had proven the viability of limited air mobility. Several officers considered those experiments the foundation for something bigger and more ambitious.

The Marines' interest in air mobility was not only sparked by an interest in the tactical and operational advantages provided but also on the need to defend their own mission from US Army encroachments.

The effect of the budget cuts of the Eisenhower administrations and how they threatened the US Army existence has already been discussed. To counter the most extreme proposals, including the alleged attempt of the US Air Force to have the Army transformed into an airfield security force, the Army developed its own limited war narrative, created a nuclear role for itself and, more importantly, as far the USMC was concerned, the Army tried to present itself as the prime crisis reaction force. Army planners tried to "reinvent" themselves by creating the Strategic Army Corps (STRAC). The STRAC was in essence a group of

quickly deployable and lightly equipped airborne and infantry forces able to act as a strategic reserve worldwide. It was four divisions strong, two infantry and two airborne; however, despite the ability to be air transported quickly, it lacked armour, artillery and the logistic capability for sustained operations. While the light elements could have deployed relatively quickly, the heavier components required a massive mobilization of air transport and sealift assets. Those assets would have been made available to STRAC only in the case of major crisis.

Furthermore, its strategic availability was also questioned. The only event that would have authorized a deployment of the STRAC would have been a major crisis in Europe. In this case the STRAC would have been committed there and not in other parts of the world.

Yet, despite its shortcoming and limitations, the simple creation of the STRAC forced the USMC to react because it was seen by the Marine leadership as a threat to their own strategic mission. Air mobility was thus seen as an answer to the Army's STRAC.

The majority of officers wanted to integrate helicopter assault into their traditional amphibious mission; the more visionary supported a complete replacement of traditional landing craft and landing vehicles with helicopters and aircraft. While both concepts were theoretically interesting, the common problem was the lack of availability of suitable machines for them. Even the adoption of a mixed approach to the use of helicopters forced the Corps to reconsider even basic equipment specifications. If the entire assault and shore movement had to be conducted by air, every piece of equipment in the

Corps inventory had to be air-portable. Even if only the assault troops were to be deployed in this way, their equipment still had to meet the same criteria.

The debate about how best to integrate the new technology in the current force structure or how to adapt the current force to the new technology started in 1951, and it did not end until 1956 with the publication of the findings of the Hogaboom Board.¹²⁸ In the end, the Board recommended what amounted to a partial implementation of the air mobility concept. The entire assault force, including direct support artillery, had to be deployable by helicopter. Heavier support elements were to be deployed by traditional sealift capabilities. To make this concept work, the heavy units (self-propelled artillery, amphibious tractors and tanks) were removed from Marine divisions and placed in a general corps pool away from divisions' direct control. While the change was meant to be only administrative, the net effect was to cut training between armour and infantry. This, in turn, dismantled the combined arms team the Marines had so painfully built from their own experiences in the Pacific war. In addition the requirement for the assault echelon to be air-portable meant a re-evaluation of existing crew served weapons. The design of new weapons such as the M98 Howitzer, a howitzer and mortar hybrid placed a further financial burden on already strained resources.

The harsh reality of armed forces budgets in the period forced only a partial implementation of the Board's recommendations during 1956-1962.

¹²⁸ The Hogaboom Board, named for General Robert E. Hogaboom the board director, was a 16 man board tasked to 'making recommendations for the optimum organization, composition, and equipment of the Fleet Marine Force.'

As an example, the helicopters on which the new concepts rested were still prototypes or simple drawings. Developing the new helicopters required a massive effort especially because the requirements exceeded the technological state of the art. The USMC helicopter program was slow, prone to troubles and quickly over budget. The requirement for an increase in the lift capacity pushed the new helicopter projects to be overweight, thus reducing performance and range which in turn compromised their effectiveness in delivering troops ashore. It was then pointed out that helicopters required specialized ships, resembling aircraft carriers rather than traditional amphibious assault ships, to be effectively employed, thus requiring more resources and full Navy cooperation.

Substantial budget and structural cuts affected the USMC as much as the other services. In 1957, the USMC internal debates on how to better implement the new technology were solved, and the Corps had settled for a less ambitious combined implementation of a mixed sea and air assault. At the same time an order of the Secretary of the Navy reduced the overall manpower of the Corps by around 25 percent, its aircraft by around 30 percent and financial resources in a similar way. The sweeping recommendations of the Hogaboom Board were thus made useless.

Having made air mobility the centrepiece of doctrinal and operational development, the US Marine Corps was bound to shield the helicopter program as much as possible by making cuts in other areas. The need to fund several different helicopter programs made the other requirements a moot point. Some weapons programs were cut or scaled back including even the M98 Howitzer,

which was supposed to be the centrepiece of the new airmobile artillery, was deployed only in reduced numbers. In the end, the necessity to fund the helicopters created a vicious circle wherein the helicopters themselves drained resources from other programs designed to provide the USMC with full air-mobility. Besides affecting modernisation, the cuts and the need to preserve the development of the helicopters affected the entire force structure. The complements of units were trimmed and their effectives kept under full authorized establishment; furthermore, combined arms training and exercises above battalion level were reduced.

2.4 COIN resurgence?

There is no mention of anything other than conventional operations hours at the Marine Corps senior school level until 1962. By 1955 even the mention of “Small Wars” had disappeared from the school curriculum.¹²⁹ The school at Quantico concentrated its efforts in instruction on more conventional topics. The core of the program was “the organization, equipment, and employment of amphibious forces up to and including corps level. Use of the helicopter for movement of troops and equipment is particularly emphasized.”¹³⁰

COIN exercises did not figure in command summaries for the period either. The largest tactical unit employed by the USMC was the brigade, but usual field exercises involved only a couple of infantry battalions. In 1962, however, everything changed. The US Army was assuming the lead, and the burden, to develop an effective COIN national strategy. They had been directed to do so by

¹²⁹ Bittner, ‘Curriculum Evolution’, p. 45.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 47.

the *Overseas Internal Defense Policy of 1962*. In the framework of the ODP directive, the counterinsurgency “ferment” also returned to the Marine Corps. In an article commenting on the upcoming graduation of the 1962-63 class at the Senior School, the *Quantico Sentry*, the base journal of the Marine Corps Barracks at Quantico, stated that the officers were now well versed in “American foreign policy, emergency actions short of war, and counterinsurgency”.¹³¹ With the reorganization of the school system in 1964 and the renaming of the Senior School as the ‘Command and Staff College’, the curriculum now included a COIN oriented subject, but it was still based on traditional force operations. Even though the premise of the massive ‘graduation’ exercise in 1962-63, Operation Packard XIII, was stated as assisting “another country stricken by subversion and outside aggression”, the actual exercise involved only conventional landing and combat operations. The stated purpose of Packard XII was:

To prepare these officers to plan concurrently with Naval Commanders and to make plans, quick decisions and take action during mock combat conditions in a simulated landing assault involving widespread dispersion, these students must also apply the techniques of executing, controlling and protecting the ship—to—shore movement of their troops.¹³²

COIN subjects were marginal and not as well developed as in the equivalent US Army schools, and, more importantly, they were based on Army models and manuals. The Army had taken over direction of the military part of the overall national COIN strategy.

¹³¹ Bittner, ‘Curriculum Evolution’, p. 47.

¹³² Ibid, p. 48.

The analysis of field exercises in the period shows the same trend. While the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific commander claimed that the Force was making massive progress toward a full implementation of COIN operations, the actual records show that COIN exercises were only slowly introduced and were on smaller scale often as an appendage to bigger exercises focused on landing operations. For example, in 1962, the FMF, Pacific commander was praising progress on counter-guerrilla training reporting:

Counter-guerrilla warfare continues to receive training emphasis.

Organizational schools are in full and constant operation throughout the command.¹³³

Yet the 3rd Marine Division, the major unit most concerned with contingency operations in Asia, performed only one battalion level counter-guerrilla exercise, while two other battalions performed company and platoon level patrol and jungle training during their deployment in Thailand and in the Philippines. Three major exercises, one regimental, one brigade sized and a multinational SEATO manoeuvre, involving both the 3rd and the 1st Marine Divisions were conducted. All three were amphibious assaults; only the SEATO exercise, Operation TUNGULAN, included an appendage of COIN operations. In contrast, the 1st Marine division counter-guerrilla training was reduced to a six day 'counter-guerrilla school' for companies, and, in the second quarter of 1962, only five

¹³³CDR'S COMBAT READINESS REPORT, 3rd quarter 1962, p.6, Folder 001, Item 1201001012 US Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Hereafter USMC History Collection.

companies were processed in that school. No mention of other companies attending this school is made in the other three quarters of the year.¹³⁴

2.5 Marines and COIN, a balance

The available documentation points to a conclusion different from what the US Marine Corps official history maintains. As far as strategy, doctrine and operations were concerned, the “small wars” experience had not been overly central in the USMC even when the so called “banana wars” were still being fought. When the corps was still involved in the Nicaraguan operation its leadership was already changing focus from COIN to conventional war.

While several officers were actively working to codify and disseminate the small wars experience, the entire school system was instead refocusing its target. While it is true that as an institution the US Marine Corps had not completely forgotten its own COIN experience after Pearl Harbor, it had surely neglected it. Indeed, despite the contention that “the Marines had a long considered doctrine on how to defeat a communist insurgency”, the “new” Corps showed a marked lack of interest in anything not related to amphibious operations at doctrinal, training, equipment and strategic levels.¹³⁵ Survival consumed the Corps during the years of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Being the smallest of the armed services as well as the one that was duplicating other services’ capabilities, the USMC saw its very existence threatened.

¹³⁴ CDR'S COMBAT READINESS REPORT, 2nd Quarter 1962, p. 5, , Folder 001, Item 1201001011 USMC History Collection.

¹³⁵ Gilbert, 'III MAF', p. 53.

In addition, another peculiar aspect of the Corps was its direct link to the US Navy. It is an unpalatable fact to most Marines that for almost all practical and funding purposes the Marines are a part of the Department of the Navy. To preserve its own existence the Corps had to present itself as providing an essential mission not duplicated by any other service. Furthermore, that mission had to be supported by the Navy thus fitting into the latter service's strategic vision.

The initial investment in helicopters as an alternative and potentially revolutionary means to conduct that mission meant that when the political climate forced a reduction of the Corps in the second half of the Fifties the Corps was not willing to abandon the development of the air mobility concept.

This in turn led to a deep reshaping of the entire force structure to make the air-mobility concept a reality. The operative word was "lightness" which meant reshaping equipment and doctrine. Yet, in a period of budget restriction, the sweeping reforms envisioned by the Hogaboom board proved an illusion. The side effect of this was a reduced effectiveness in combat arms operations. This was primarily because existing equipment was not appropriate for the new doctrine, and to save money, large scale training was reduced. Combined arms training was so restricted that a Marine tanker reported the infantry was not accustomed to operate with armour any more.¹³⁶

The first chapter has demonstrated that Army strategic culture influenced the development of Army counterinsurgency doctrine through a combination of

¹³⁶ Oscar Gilbert, *Marine Tank Battles in Vietnam*, (Casemate: Newbury, 2008), p. 62.

historical traditions in what was, in the end, a debate by different groups inside the organization including Special Forces, psychological warfare, infantry and artillery schools). Army culture was based on debating ideas inside the organizations and then crafting a common position. The US Marine Corps introduced a completely different approach. Usually Corps strategy and doctrine were not shaped by internal debate, but, rather, from the top down, usually driven by the personality of the Marine Corps Commandant.¹³⁷ The small size of the Corps ensured personal relationships between almost all field and general grade officers thus adding a way to exercise influence completely different from the Army. Also, the smaller size and worldwide commitments offered a much greater freedom of action for division and Fleet Marine Forces commanders than the one afforded to division, corps and army commanders in the US Army. Until their views directly conflicted with the Commandant's, those decentralized commanders were able to implement their own ideas on training, operations and to a certain extent even strategy.

This complex set of factors contributed to shaping a nuanced situation with regards to counterinsurgency operations after World War Two.

¹³⁷ The influence of the personality of the commandant, much more important than the Army's equivalent, is clearly evident in the role of Archibald Henderson and in shaping the Corps mission according to what they saw as important. These figures were often masters in using public relations tools to further their and the corps goals. Every occasion in which Marines performed some real or hyped act of heroism was duly seized by the commandant and the corps' propaganda machine to create an iconic image. Few marines participating in the assault on Mexico City had been exaggerated until the battle became part of the first verse of the Marine Hymn. The marine action at Belleau Wood, France, 1918 had been transformed in a legend with even an alleged German nickname for the marines "Teufel Hunden" that then became Devil Dogs in English, one of the popular nicknames for marines. Secretary of the Navy James Forrester (1892-1949) remarked after seeing the Iwo Jima flag raising that 'that means we will have a US Marine Corps for the next one hundred years' in reference to the Corps own propaganda activities. More recently during the Vietnam conflict it has been remarked 'every marine squad has a combat cameraman' (Colonel Jerry T. Morelock, US Army (ret) in a personal interview).

At higher level, the USMC was not interested in anything except amphibious assault. The need to stay in step with Navy requirements ensured that. The US Navy was styling itself as the premier power projection force of the United States. It also claimed a strategic role in opposition to the Air Force. To fulfil these roles the Navy needed a force capable of quickly seizing enemy bases or defending friendly ones when required. That force had to be light and capable of rapid strategic redeployment, yet it had to be able to deploy heavier assets if required. The USMC filled this role with an emphasis on amphibious assaults both with the traditional over the beach concept and the new vertical envelopment. It was only when limited war and COIN again became a national priority of the Kennedy administration that the Marine leadership re-embraced their 'small war' heritage. When the Corps looked at COIN afresh, it turned to the US Army for doctrine.

There are various sources that support this contention. First of all, the USMC failed to update their own doctrinal publications. There are no manuals produced after the 1940 revision of the "Small Wars Manual" until the adoption of the Army material on the subject in 1963. Second, until the Administration reinstated COIN as a defence priority, training on this topic was not conducted by the Marine Corps. When COIN was again introduced, the scale of the exercises and their complexity was not comparable with those conducted by the army. The USMC lacked the large military reservations and the active involvement of civilian communities that the Army enjoyed. As a consequence, USMC COIN exercises were more like simple drills than full scale open exercises.

While it can be argued that the “Small Wars Manual” was still relevant, it is puzzling that it was not updated and reissued especially considering that the US Army was issuing three main revisions of its COIN doctrine in the 1945-1965 time span. It is interesting that an organization purported as devoted to COIN was lacking training and doctrinal sources on counterinsurgency; it is also revealing to note that no large COIN exercise were conducted, except as appendages of amphibious assaults. Confirming this trend there is also the sudden disappearance of “small wars” topics from the various iterations of the senior school.

It is worth noting the peculiar situation of the USMC in the American defence establishment. Being a separate organization with roles drawn both from the naval and land service, its existence had often been threatened by both the Navy and the Army, and, later, the Air Force especially in periods when defence funds were scarce. Its mission had also evolved according both to national strategic requirements and the necessity to carve a ‘vital’ role for the Corps. USMC leadership had always looked to develop a mission capable of ensuring the Corps’ survival. At first, the mission of the Corps had nothing to do with expeditionary warfare or counterinsurgency. Its primary role was to guard US Navy ships against mutiny. Only later were additional missions envisaged. When a change of focus was implemented, it was to ensure the Corps’ survival. As soon a mission was not deemed important it was dropped. In the Wilson period “Small Wars” were perceived as necessary for USMC survival so they were given strong institutional support. When they were not seen as part of national strategy and

the Corps' association with them was perceived as counterproductive they were quietly shelved. After 1945 those operations were not re-considered. It was only when COIN operations again became the centrepiece of national defence strategy that they were reintroduced, but the Corps never developed a unique COIN of its own. That, in turn, allowed freedom of action for individuals who had developed their understanding of those operations in the interwar years.

Chapter 3: Entering Vietnam, 1961-65

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to outline how the situation in Vietnam interplayed with the COIN doctrine described in Chapter 1 and how the evolving situation in Vietnam prompted the Army to slowly move the balance of its involvement from a pure advisory role to an overt conventional intervention by replacing a COIN oriented approach with something that has been often described as overly conventional. To accomplish this task the chapter will cover both the advisory period between 1956 and 1964 and the subsequent initial intervention period in an effort to describe and understand the reasons that shaped the final iteration of the US Army campaign plan for Vietnam.

Not only the American role in Indochina changed in the period between the partition of Indochina that followed the Geneva Agreement in 1954 but also the situation in Indochina and, more specifically, the threat faced by South Vietnam changed. The level of violence escalated progressively during the years modifying the situation from one of political confrontation to one of open warfare in turn forcing Washington to adapt to circumstances.

While the focus of this chapter is the US Army approach to Vietnam in 1965 and how the institution shaped its doctrine to face its challenges, it is impossible to completely divorce the post 1965 period from the previous years. The situation that had developed in Vietnam strongly influenced US Army thinking and, in part, forced a revision of counterinsurgency doctrine. The more the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army escalated their aggression, the more the Army was

questioning the wisdom of counterinsurgency as applied to the situation developing in Vietnam. This phenomenon has already been suggested in Chapter 1 with the criticism voiced by the CDC over existing doctrine on the possibility of having to face a hybrid form of war.¹³⁸

3.2 Vietnam 1956-1960, Initial Assistance and Planning

The origins of the American involvement in Vietnam are complex, have been covered in several works and are still under debate. Simplifying the whole process, the United States slowly but steadily replaced France from 1954 as the main foreign ally of the fledgling Republic of Vietnam. The support provided was continuous if not consistent. While political support for the fledgling country was new the military support was in large part stemming from the previous support for the French efforts in Indochina, but this increased in tempo after the signature of the Geneva accords. The aid spanned several areas from security to economy, but, security and defence related support slowly took a preeminent role. The pre-eminence of security aid to the Republic of Vietnam increased sharply in 1960 with the start of the northern supported insurgency.¹³⁹

At the start, the core of this security assistance was provided by both the military mission, the Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam (MAAGV), dispatched to aid the French government during the Indochina war, and a constantly increasing assortment of elements belonging to various civilian and military agencies loosely coordinated by the newly established American embassy in

¹³⁸ CDC, Special Warfare and Civil Affair Group, *Concepts and General Doctrine for Counterinsurgency*, July 1965, p. 98

¹³⁹ While the debate on the causes of the conflict in South Vietnam is still ongoing, the documentary evidence strongly supports the contention that the shift from “criminal activity” and dissension to armed struggle was prompted by the decision of the Hanoi communist party to provide weapons, cadres, personnel and assorted support to the movement.

Saigon, South Vietnam's capital city. The responsibilities of the Embassy, the military mission and the several other agencies involved were never clearly defined and were constantly increasing and changing according to changes in the local situation. This proliferation of parallel sources of advice and support was a strong departure both from Volkmann's recommendations of unified direction and even from the contemporary practice in Korea or the Philippines, and it is more than reminiscent of the confused situation in Korea before the 1950 invasion.¹⁴⁰ These responsibilities were broad and can be described as a general nation building effort. Security assistance was limited to supervising the creation of the security forces of the new state. While the newly formed Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was indeed an unstable country and its government often seemed shaky and on the verge of collapse, the immediate security situation was not considered threatening from Washington's point of view. While an invasion from North Vietnam or a communist insurrection was considered possible, they were not deemed imminent.

In such a framework, the American role was limited. MAAGV competencies were restricted to distribute new equipment, organize and supervise the training establishment and liaise between the US Department of Defense, the US Department of State and their Vietnamese counterparts. Neither the MAAGV nor the other organizations operating in South Vietnam were intended as operational commands, but they were instead training and support ones. MAAGV's main role was to funnel military supplies and related funding from the United States to the nascent state. In this guise, it was to supervise the

¹⁴⁰ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 329-334; Greenberg, 'Hukbalahap', pp. 87-88.

transformation of the French Armée Nationale Vietnamese (ANV) to the Army of Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and to create several internal security organizations. An additional but closely related role was to advise the local government on how best to structure and train the ARVN to meet the anticipated threats. There was nothing different from similar involvements in other fledging nations; furthermore, it was a limited effort compared to the contemporary involvement with Republic of Korea.

While civilian organizations worked on different, often unconnected, and conflicting programs, the initial focus of the MAAGV was relatively simple.¹⁴¹

After the newly appointed Saigon's Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem pressed the French to cease their training and advisory role the MAAGV replaced them.¹⁴²

The mission was indeed deceptively simple. However, to build and train the indigenous army in accordance with the new outlook of Washington's foreign assistance strategy required much more effort, resources and innovative solutions than anticipated.

The first head of MAAGV, Lieutenant General Samuel Williams, was given the task of shaping an effective army while meeting the requirements stipulated by

¹⁴¹ Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the US Army In Vietnam, 1951-1964* (Washington: US Army 1983), p. 239.

¹⁴² Ngo Dinh Diem (1901-1963) is a central and controversial figure in South Vietnam history. He can be considered the founder of 'modern' South Vietnam and led it first as prime minister and then as president from 1955 to 1963. Supporters have described him as a forward looking and determined nationalist, detractors as a cruel and ruthless tyrant and an American puppet. During its tenure the Republic of Vietnam overcome the problem of the independent religious sects and organized criminal syndicate inherited from the French period and survived two initial attempts of insurgency in 1959 and 1961. Dodge and Wiest, *Triumph Revisited: Historians battles for the Vietnam War*, (New York: Routledge 2010), pp. 29.

both Saigon and Washington.¹⁴³ The first years of this 'job' were relatively quiet in the field, but were nevertheless characterized by strong debates regarding both a rationale for the ARVN mission and the best way to organize the service to perform it.

Until 1960 there was no real insurgency and thus no pressing need to tailor the entire security apparatus against one; still an insurgency was feared. General Williams feared an insurgency would have been used by the communists to divert the army from the border.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, while a Korean style conventional invasion was feared, there was no indication of massing of North Vietnamese soldiers on the border. In order of priority security threats were assessed as internal coups from the military, the presence of paramilitary forces raised by criminal gangs inside South Vietnam and then, sharing the last priority order, a conventional invasion from North Vietnam or a communist insurgency.¹⁴⁵

During the first critical months of Diem's administration the French trained and organized army seemed quite effective in defeating the private armies of the criminal syndicates and the religious sects and reinforcing the American

¹⁴³ Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams (1897-1984) headed the MAAGV from 1955 to 1960. He had seen active combat service in World War I and World War 2 even being demoted and removed from his post as assistant division commander of the 90th Infantry Division during the Normandy campaign. Between 1954 and While he has been accused to have ignored guerrilla threat there is no sound evidence and on the opposite he pressed the Diem administration to prepare for this kind of threat in several occasions. Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 310; Notes Handed to President Diem by Gen Williams, 28 Dec 55; Memo, Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG, Vietnam), n.d., sub: Notes on Anti-Guerrilla Operations, atch to Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 18 Mar 60, sub: Notes on Anti-Guerrilla Operations, forwarding of, 3360, 1960, RG 218, NARA; *FRUS*, 1958-60, 1:291-92.

¹⁴⁴ Notes Handed to President Diem by Gen Williams, 28 Dec 55, quoted in Spector, 'Advice', p. 274 ; Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 310.

¹⁴⁵ Spector, 'Advice', pp. 240, 259, 300.

perception that properly trained and equipped soldiers were able to perform a wide spectrum of missions.¹⁴⁶ This perception was reinforced by two early operations to expand government control in Ca Mau, Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai provinces, areas where Viet Minh forces had operate extensively during the war against the French. The army was effective in all these operations.¹⁴⁷

The lessons learned from Greece, Korea and the Philippines were conflicting. While General Williams rated unconventional threats as more likely than conventional ones, he was also worried about using the ARVN as an internal security force. In a memo to President Diem he mentioned the Korean precedent where the escalation of internal violence had created a situation favourable to an external conventional invasion. In Summer 1950 the bulk of the South Korean army was spread out fighting guerrillas and insurgents in the interior of the country instead of defending the border which was subsequently crossed by the North Korea's People Army. For Williams, while the ARVN had to be capable to perform COIN missions, the commitment of the army to such a mission had to be limited in time and number.¹⁴⁸

This approach fits well with the prevailing wisdom of the time. It also fit another operational requirement. Using conventionally organized divisions as a pool to provide battalions for COIN operations was much more cost effective than to create a hodgepodge of independent units only for internal security and then, in the event of an invasion, shape those units into field formations. Finally practical

¹⁴⁶ Williams maintained that small unit tactics proficiency was the best way to prepare soldiers for every occurrence. *FRUS, 1958-60*, 1:291, 475-76; Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 310; Moyar, 'Triumph' pp. 47-50.

¹⁴⁷ Moyar, 'Triumph', p. 57.

¹⁴⁸ Williams to Diem, 28 December 1955, *FRUS, 1955-57*, 1:281.

economic considerations precluded an army large enough to cover both missions well. The local economy was weak, and the US was leery of massive expenditures to support the army.

After toying with different organizational structures during 1958 Williams decided to build a conventional looking force centred on a strong infantry component in the hope of satisfying both strategic requirements and not overwhelm the RVN economy.¹⁴⁹ He created a force based of 7 enlarged divisions. The approach was based on two main assumptions. The first, in line with Williams' thinking, was that infantry battalions could easily be assigned to a COIN mission if the need arose, and the second, even more important, that the main player in case of internal insurgency would have to be local militia and not the army. This was in perfect line with the available doctrinal literature, foreign experiences, and early US experiences in Korea, Greece and the Philippines. It was assumed that local troops would have better knowledge of the terrain, town and village realities, and they would be motivated by defending their own homes. Plus, being a part-time organization and one requiring, at least in theory, minimal logistical support, it fit perfectly in a restricted budget.

Williams thus suggested the creation of both a static militia force to protect infrastructures and population centres and a mobile one to be able to implement the aggressive tactics favoured by American doctrine. Diem concurred with the advice and created two militia organizations, the Civil Guard and the Self Defense Corps (SDC). The latter was the static militia and the former

¹⁴⁹ Spector, 'Advice', pp. 263-264.

the more mobile one. While in theory the move was sound, its practical implementation was rather lacking. The militia is the area where a first divergence emerged between COIN doctrine and its practical employment in Vietnam. While US Army COIN approach insisted that militia organizations were indeed paramilitary organizations to be placed under army control, Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow and the State Department saw them as an extension of the civilian police establishment.¹⁵⁰

This difference was rather more substantial than just cosmetic. The Army saw potential insurgencies as emergency situations where normal peacetime laws were supplanted by emergency powers. The State Department instead looked at insurgencies as a simple extension of organized crime that had to be controlled by normal police means. What the latter approach discounted was the ability of an insurgency to escalate the level of organized violence on its own. Still the State Department was supported by several civilian organizations that were becoming more and more involved in security matters at the time. With the broadening appeal of counterinsurgency and limited warfare in the USA more entities were drawn into it creating a sort of institutional chaos.

The divergence about South Vietnamese militias was highlighted by the dysfunctional way in which US agencies approached security problems. While everyone was stressing unity of effort and cooperation every agency and department operated alone without any meaningful coordination. Too often

¹⁵⁰ Elbridge Durbrow (1903-1997) was Ambassador in the Republic of Vietnam from 1957 to 1961. He was a former deputy ambassador in Moscow. His relationship with Diem, Williams, and his successor, Lieutenant General McGarr, was spotty at best.

these phrases were used only to justify a centralization of control under a given agency rather than a balanced effort. The US Army had stressed the need for coordinated political, social and military responses to insurgencies in its earliest COIN manuals. Having largely employed such an approach in the absence of direct civilian interference in the Philippines sixty years earlier, in Korea before 1950 and against the communist insurrection in the Philippines after 1947, the US Army failed to adapt in a situation where control of such measures was shared with civilian agencies. While this approach flowed directly from the assumption that insurgencies were indeed situations akin to war, it also revealed a marked disagreement as to how foreign aid should be viewed between the different agencies. For the US Army, foreign assistance was intended to support a local government in achieving its goals. For the State Department, assistance was a tool to be used both to help friendly countries but also to pressure them to implement policies desired by the State Department.

Complementing and exacerbating this institutional chaos was the tattered personal relationship between Williams and Durbrow. According to Williams, Durbrow was 'better suited to be the senior salesman in a ladies store than to be representing the US in an Asian country'. Similar comments on Durbrow were expressed in Williams' correspondence with other DoD officials.¹⁵¹ While the tone was certainly extreme it shows the massive tensions existing between Durbrow and the MAAGV. Williams was both resenting ambassadorial interference in military matters and his constant meddling in South Vietnamese politics. The 'feud' between Williams and Durbrow extended to their own staff

¹⁵¹ Williams to Colonel R.E. Lawless, May 15, 1962, box 8, Williams Papers, CMH.

reaching the point where the advisory group and the 'In Country Team' were barely on speaking terms and with MAAGV officers sharing the view of their commander on the Ambassador.¹⁵²

Besides the deep divergences between the Embassy and MAAGV the militia program was plagued by several practical problems. Some of these problems stemmed from local conditions such as the lack of skilled manpower and effective leadership for the militia, but most of them stemmed from the American side. Once the US Army unified approach to internal security problems was eschewed in favour of a multilateral approach the program became the hostage of inter-agency rivalry. The Self Defense Corps was allotted to the South Vietnamese Ministry of Defense, but MAAGV was not allowed to supervise its organization and training, this was the province of the Embassy. The Civil Guard fell under the Ministry of the Interior and under USAID agency supervision. That agency in turn gave the task to train and equip the Civil Guard to a civilian mission led by Michigan State University. Funding and training the militias were not under MAAGV's control but under the Embassy creating a situation where military equipment had to be procured outside Army channels. In turn the Embassy, and in particular Ambassador Durbrow, used these programs as a way to pressure the South Vietnamese government.

The proverbial last nail in the militia coffin was Ambassador Durbrow's decision to use it as a tool against Diem. Durbrow used the funding of the militia to

¹⁵² Spector, 'Advice', pp. 276-277; Interview by Spector with Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, Dec. 9, 76, Historians files, CMH; Spector with Col Ernest P. Lasche, U.S. Army (Retired), 30 Aug 79, Historians Files, CMH.

pressure Diem in accepting changes and reforms. For this purpose funds were given or withdrawn at Durbrow's discretion. Only if Diem was willing to bow to this pressure would the militias be funded. While this system was effective as an instrument of political control on allied countries it also ensured that the militias never received proper funding and training, equipment, and recruiting was negatively affected.¹⁵³ When, in 1957, Williams volunteered to take over training and funding of the Civil Guard to compensate for the unreliability of the support from the US Embassy, Durbrow, still the head of the 'In Country Team', simply stopped funding altogether for the militia programs.

These problems doomed the militia program to abject failure. The SDC was underfunded, underequipped and poorly led quickly becoming known in villages as the "Chicken Stealing Corps". In addition the embassy was always trying to cut funding for it on the basis that the security situation was improving, thus making a 60'000 man town militia redundant.

The other branch, the Civil Guard was transformed from a militia force to something more akin to US State Troopers. Training was centred on proper police behaviour, highway traffic control and criminal investigation. The Civil Guard was thus redesigned as an organization to promote the government efforts in the countryside.¹⁵⁴ The underlying idea was that the Civil Guard actions would have improved the legitimacy of the RVN government as a modern force

¹⁵³ A similar approach to the use of funding for exercising a certain degree of political control appeared as a suggestion later when the Kennedy administration finally defined COIN approach at government level. While the procedure was framed as a mean to exercise pressure on uncooperative governments to ensure that they followed US advice in COIN the ODP also recognized its potential problems and the fact that a similar method was indeed detrimental to the overall effort. Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 239.

¹⁵⁴ Moyer, 'Triumph', p. 70.

looking to the welfare of the population rather than a combat force designed to hunt for guerrillas. This change of mission stemmed from the assumption that the extension of the trappings of 'modern and effective' governance to the countryside was a critical factor in stabilizing a country. While these decisions were taken long before Modernization Theory was accepted as the central core of COIN effort at an official level with the adoption of the ODP, it is easy to see how official rationale behind it was similar to the later theory especially in light of Eisenhower's stated beliefs about using economic rehabilitation to defeat communism.¹⁵⁵ In accordance with these ideas, basic weaponry of the Civil Guard was degraded from light infantry small arms, rifles, submachine guns, carbines and light machine guns to .38 calibre police revolvers and, more importantly, its members were not trained in small units tactics, jungle operations or extended patrolling. According to Moyer these changes in mission, training and equipment made the Civil Guard unsuited for Vietnam's need. Furthermore the insistence to keep the Guard outside MAAGV's influence deprived the Guard access to the only pool of trained personnel in country, the ARVN.¹⁵⁶

Despite these restrictions and disagreements, until 1960 the low key approach to COIN problems coupled with massive economic aid, effective government repression of internal dissent through police and intelligence organizations and a distinct lack of external support for an armed insurgency produced remarkable results. Saigon's government grip on the country was steadily increasing, the

¹⁵⁵ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 164, 238.

¹⁵⁶ Moyer, 'Triumph', p. 81.

attempts by the various pseudo-religious sects to wage a guerrilla campaign were crushed and what both Diem and his American counterparts considered the main threat, the communist underground organization, was a shambles.¹⁵⁷ At the same time, the two main foreign supporters of Hanoi's government were restraining Hanoi from initiating any form of aggression. These two factors greatly eased the burden on the RVN government and made it possible for Diem to increase South Vietnam's stability.

Even in this 'peaceful' period the government's efforts show two strong tendencies. First of all they centred more on what could be construed as an attempt to coerce opponents rather than persuade them.¹⁵⁸ While Diem's initiatives included a sizeable land reform and the use of the army in civic action projects, the underlying emphasis was more on repressive measures.¹⁵⁹

At the same time there was also a strong division of roles between the different branches of the security apparatus. While police and paramilitary organizations carried the bulk of the repressive measures in the course of the so called

¹⁵⁷ The area around Saigon and part of the Mekong delta housed several 'sects', the main three being the Hoa Hao, the Binh Xuyen and the Cao Dai. These sects were a mix of political, military, religious and, particularly in the case of the Binh Xuyen, criminal organizations. For modern standards they could be described as colourful and in some case they seemed a real life representation of inter-war caricatures of Asian culture. Moyer, 'Triumph', pp. 21,41. Under the French colonial administration these sects had enjoyed great privilege in exchange of support in the war against the Viet Minh. While several of them, particularly the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dao were extremely anti-communists their existence was a threat of the state. Of the three major sects the Binh Xuyen attempted to overthrow Diem in an open confrontation over the control of Saigon, some Hoa Hao generals tried to wage a guerrilla war and a splinter of the Cao Dai proclaimed a 'holy war' against the government. While the Binh Xuyen were destroyed by the National Army the other two sects were largely contained by members of inside factions that had sided with the government during the 1954-55 period. Once they renounced their open 'militancy' Cao Dai and Hoa Hao became staunch supporters of the government and their own militias proved extremely reliable when Hanoi started its war against South Vietnam. Moyer, 'Triumph', pp. 45-54.

¹⁵⁸ Birtle, 'Persuasion and Coercion', p. 48.

¹⁵⁹ Moyer, Triumph, pp. 80-81.

‘Communist Denunciation Campaigns’, the regular army was used to repair and construct roads, build hospitals and schools, and distribute medical care. Considering the considerable independence exhibited by the Diem administration it is difficult to ascertain if that separation was a product of internal reasoning or American advice, yet the same differentiation in the use of different security branches was a trademark of American advisory efforts in similar situations all over the world.¹⁶⁰ Both the local government and the Americans were, at this stage, keenly interested in promoting the image of an apolitical army in the same way.

As far the American involvement was concerned, this period saw the majority of the efforts spent on training and logistical matters. MAAGV was a small organization and there was no intention to expand it. While contingency plans existed to use SEATO and US forces in Vietnam in case of an emergency these had all been formulated in the context of a larger theatre war or as direct answer to a conventional invasion. The idea of using American troops in a COIN role was alien to both military and civilians alike.¹⁶¹

The image of the US Army’s effort in Vietnam in this early advisory period is a far cry from the narrow minded organization that was painted in several sources as obsessed by nuclear weapons. Indeed the US Army, the service that was more closely involved with support to the Vietnamese government, was a flexible

¹⁶⁰ Birtle, ‘Counterinsurgency’, pp. 293-294

¹⁶¹ Birtle, ‘Counterinsurgency’, p. 237; JCS, SM-797-62, 18 Jul 62, sub: Military Accomplishments in the Counterinsurgency Field Since 20 January 1961, p. I-20, Historian Files CMH.

organization that grasped the difficulties of the mission and the key points of the situation it was facing was along with trying to learn from its own recent past.

Probably the most far reaching analysis of the situation in Vietnam was constituted by General Williams' recommendations to Diem concerning the dichotomy of the threat South Vietnam was facing and the relative missions entrusted to the army and militias. While often these have been dismissed as proof that the MAAGV was only concerned about an hypothetical invasion from North Vietnam, these recommendations reflect instead a deep understanding of the situation and have to be assessed within the context of previous experiences in Korea and Greece. While Williams was rightly concerned by a conventional invasion, he was even more concerned with the possibility of an internal insurgency as well as the possibility of a dual threat. Williams clearly showed that the Army, even at this early stage, was already aware of the possibility of a combination of conventional and unconventional threats.

The institution's answer to such problems was also enlightening. It was a combination of basic military logic and of traditional American insistence on a clear divide between military and political activities. MAAGV was concerned by internal security threats, Williams' militias were a way to economically face that threat but also a way of avoiding involving the army in internal security roles. This approach also mirrored some of the concerns of the Diem's administration about involving the Army in politics. Keeping the Army apolitical was a way to strengthen the government, making the Army an instrument rather than a competitor of the government. Still, despite the concerns on the political nature

and role of the Army, some American officials turned to the Army to replace Diem when they decided he was not a useful partner anymore. The coup against Diem was not an isolate occurrence. Coups made by American supported or, as in the case of the Republic of Korea, American created armies were frequent. The case could also be made that American advice, stressing apolitical role, stability and positive action, was the prime mover in such coups, especially when reform minded field of junior grade officers were the organizers of such coups.¹⁶² Yet the end results were usually negative and distracted armies from their primary roles involving them in politics instead.

3.3 1960-1963 COIN by Advisor

Despite early successes in establishing government control and the MAAGV efforts in creating a viable security apparatus, the situation was destined to change very quickly for the worse. In January 1959, Hanoi's politburo finally decided, despite the lack of external support, to force what they envisioned as the definitive unification of Vietnam by violent means.¹⁶³ Still the initial effects of the decision were minimal as Ho Chi Minh was stymied in his attempt to gather Soviet and Chinese support for his enterprise. The only tangible actions Hanoi took at the time were limited troop movements to create a supply conduit between North and South Vietnam: the embryo of the famous Ho Chi Minh trail.¹⁶⁴ Local communist cells in the RVN were thoroughly briefed in late 1959

¹⁶² Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 302.

¹⁶³ Moyer, 'Triumph', p. 83.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 84.

with the offensive slated to start in January 1960.¹⁶⁵ The apparent aim was to move from a strategy of peaceful coexistence to one of violent confrontation despite a definite lack of support from allies. Infiltration of personnel and supplies was viewed as a prerequisite for the start of the armed struggle.

The importance of this decision underscored one of the larger on-going debates on the nature of the war in Vietnam. Was this an internal insurgency that gradually expanded or an attempt by an external actor, in this case the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, to first destabilize and then outright annex a neighbour? Historians and other scholars have been deeply divided along 'factional' lines with the 'orthodox' school supporting the former and the 'revisionist' school the latter interpretation. Often the divide is also used to support authors' final conclusions on the legitimacy of the American intervention, and, more often than not, it is based on personal ideology. This topic would probably deserve a study in its own right, but the available documentation tends to support the latter interpretation or at least a much broader involvement of Hanoi in creating the insurgency in the first place. If the conflict was indeed intended as an internal insurgency, it was strongly directed and heavily financed by Hanoi. It is worth noting that this was the way Moscow interpreted the situation at the time as they were trying to restrain Ho Chi Minh from initiating military activities in South Vietnam.¹⁶⁶ It also worth noting that combat operations in the RVN started after the North Vietnamese Army put in place an embryonic supply chain system to funnel weapons, personnel and supplies from

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 85.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 84.

North to South. From the start of the uprising in January 1960, activities in the South were closely controlled from Hanoi with orders and instructions being sent south. Several southern communist cadres that had been interviewed recall being briefed by people coming from the North.¹⁶⁷ Finally, the composition of Viet Cong personnel from the early days seems to show a distinct presence of northerners especially at higher levels. All these points did not lend support to the theory of an internally bred insurgency, and, while local grievances could have played a role in motivating individuals, they do not appear to have played a primary role in defining allegiance and recruiting. While this definition could appear just cosmetic and more grounds for post-war debate, in fact the perception of the dichotomy between internal insurgency and external destabilization-invasion played an important role in shaping South Vietnamese and American responses. Several key players, notably Ambassador Durbrow, in part Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and General Krulak, and certainly General Lewis Walt, strongly supported the cause of an internal insurgency while Ambassador Nolting, General Westmoreland, and other US Army officers seemed to have championed the external aggression trend. These divisions, as will be discussed later, generated severe difficulties in the American decision making process.

From the start the Vietcong attempted to clear and hold areas to establish 'liberated areas' and to engage in large scale operations. For example, its first armed attacks targeted the Khien Hoa province and aimed at the complete

¹⁶⁷ Moyer, 'Triumph', pp. 87, 89; Rand Vietnam Interviews, Ser. AG: Active Influence Within the Viet Cong and North Vietnam Armed Forces, no. 154, AD0741301.

destruction of the local government apparatus. Paramilitary organizations and the ARVN were prime targets for these attacks. On 26 January 1960, a regimental headquarters, 32nd Regiment, 21st Division, located in the Tay Ninh province, was attacked. In this case, the attack was timed to coincide with leaves awarded for the Tet holidays, and the post had a reduced garrison making the attack a resounding success.¹⁶⁸ This particular attack showed the willingness of the Vietcong to directly engage large troop concentrations from the outset of the campaign. While it can be assumed that this phase was just a build-up after several years of previous subversion, the available documentation from both sides points out a dire situation for the communist side. Far from being a gradual escalation, the insurrection was characterized by rapid tempo from the start.¹⁶⁹ In a second round of armed attacks in March, it was not uncommon for insurgents to operate in battalion strength.¹⁷⁰

The official militia structure collapsed rapidly in almost every area where it was subjected to attacks. Both the SDC and the Civil Guard, supposed to be the first line of defence against such an occurrence, were completely outmatched in firepower, training and leadership. When attacked, these units simply melted away after the first casualties thus leaving villages undefended. This in turn led to the exodus of local officials from the villages to more secure locations creating a power vacuum at local level. If no other government organizations, namely the Army, stepped in quickly, the vacuum of government authority proved fertile

¹⁶⁸ Durbrow to State, 2 March 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 111; Williams to Meyers, 20 March 1960, *FRUS, 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 121.

¹⁶⁹ A Party Account of the situation in the Nam Bo Region of South Vietnam From 1954-1960 Captured Document Translation, also known as the Crimp document, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection, Units 6 Box 1, Folder 01, D013.4B.

¹⁷⁰ Moyer, 'Triumph', p. 89.

ground for propaganda and recruitment. Faced by such unexpected and large scale attacks and the almost complete collapse of the militia organizations, the RVN government response was to employ regular army units against communist attacks. The employment of these troops usually proved sufficient to restore the situation.

The 'insurgents', now calling themselves the National Liberation Front (NLF), and labelled by the government and the press Vietcong (VC), de-escalated from high intensity operations designed to replace government control in entire provinces to a lower level of activities designed to cause attrition in the government forces and slowly expand the area controlled. When VC forces felt themselves sufficiently strong to challenge the RVN government again, they reverted to the earlier pattern of larger operations prompting a massive semi-conventional answer by security forces which forced back the VC in disarray. This escalation and de-escalation pattern can be deemed to have been implemented at least twice on an overall scale. At the end of both these cycles the Government seemed to have held the advantage which it retained until the November 1963 coup against Diem that altered the political and military landscape of South Vietnam.

This initial stage of the Vietcong insurgency appears to vindicate both US Army doctrine about the need for properly trained and equipped forces to confront insurgents and the opposition of MAAGV to civilian oversight of militia organizations. Where the army was not able to quickly regain control, the Vietcongs were able to put in place their own power structure and to exert an

effective control on the local population. This led to increased recruitment and allowed the Vietcong to become more aggressive. In turn government control quickly evaporated in large areas in a sort of domino effect. On the opposite, when the army reacted quickly, the insurgents were unable to make rapid inroads and, more importantly, the allegiance of the population seems not to have shifted considerably from pro-government to pro-insurgent.¹⁷¹

The reliance on the regular army to prevent a complete collapse created other problems that had not been fully addressed by Army literature or planners. At operational and strategic levels the ARVN had to bear the brunt of COIN operations with a force structure not designed for that role. The lack of mobility and firepower often hampered operations. Compounding these difficulties was the fact that the South Vietnamese army had still to maintain some sort of deterrent posture against a conventional invasion from North Vietnam thus being unable to fully redeploy against the insurgency.

On tactical and operational levels the lack of local reliable paramilitary networks deprived the army of reliable and timely intelligence and forcing it to rely on clumsy, slow but reasonably safe large-scale operations rather than the more effective small unit actions envisioned by its American tutors. Even if this

¹⁷¹While several contemporary training pamphlets and later commentators put great deal into explain how indoctrination, ideology and perceived legitimacy or lack of it from a given side influenced the allegiance of the local population according to the interviews conducted by Rand Corporation on captured and defected enemy personnel the primary factor seemed to have been relative strength. The overwhelming motivator in joining the National Liberation Front seemed to have been the perception it was winning and the government was losing. On the opposite side government recruitment during the war was affected by the perceived strength of the ARVN and its allies, according to Moyar in the end force was the primary motivator not as a threat but as a way to judge the probable outcome of the conflict. Moyar, 'Triumph', pp. 92-94; Rand Vietnam Interviews, ser. AG no 154; Trinh Nhu, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* Vol. 21 (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House 2002), p. 292; Nguyen, 'No Other Road', pp. 62-74.

approach was severely criticized at the time, these large operations were the only reasonable tactical option for the ARVN to continue to perform its original conventional mission and its new COIN role especially considering that the ARVN was a poorly equipped army both as a conventional and counter-guerrilla force. Lack of radios, transport, organic firepower and supporting arms prevented any other effective method in the field.

On the top of these 'practical' problems, the employment of the regular army in COIN operations also added a political concern. Drawing the army into the insurgency also magnified government prestige losses every time an army unit was defeated. It was not important that the army was, thanks to lack of funding, not better equipped than the insurgents. The simple news of an army defeat was indeed more valuable for the enemy than the actual results on the ground and the eventual booty taken in the form of weapons and supplies due to the reduction in prestige for the government cause.

Despite some assertions, the situation in South Vietnam cannot be construed as an indictment of the whole US Army COIN approach at the theoretical level. At the same time its overall implementation was far from perfect. Several factors contributed to reduce its effectiveness in this initial period. Doctrine rested on the assumption that COIN operations would have been performed by well trained, well equipped and professionally led armed organizations not a growing army that was being created almost from scratch. In essence, and what further operations in Vietnam would demonstrate, the doctrinal approach was

predicated on US Army capabilities rather than indigenous ones.¹⁷² Geographical realities, insufficient forces and political restrictions also constrained the effort of the local authorities to control infiltration from across national borders. While doctrine also predicated an ideal world where the borders of the country would have been sealed from external infiltration, in Vietnam the border was porous and the neighbouring countries hostile or, by 1961, open to communist troops and supply movements. Furthermore, the inter-agency dynamics in Vietnam were a far cry from the harmonious relationship envisaged by the Army planners, and the deteriorating situation just increased the rifts. Despite several efforts to create some form of coordination between agencies, State and Defense Departments' organizations would wage a turf war over Vietnam until more stringent measures were applied in 1967.

While Diem and his government survived the initial insurrection, the insurgency did indeed achieve significant success during the first half of 1960, and the government failed to stem the tide. This apparent lack of success increased friction between the various American agencies and between them and the Vietnamese organizations. The rift between MAAG and the embassy was pushed to the point where it was no longer tolerable and contributed to exacerbate the

¹⁷² Training and equipping indigenous armies to operate on a similar level to the US Army was indeed possible as happened in the Philippines during the Hukbalahap rebellion and in Korea with the gradual improvement of the Republic of Korea Army, but it is indeed puzzling that, despite limitations of indigenous armies their improvement did not figure prominently in COIN doctrine of the time. It is also interesting that, while providing Korea and Philippine with reasonably modern equipment the Eisenhower administration relegated the ARVN to world war two cast off, especially in the light of the accepted view that firepower at the tactical level was critical in COIN operations as expressed by FM31-20.

personal rift between Diem and Durbrow.¹⁷³ The latter blamed the failure of the Civil Guard and SDC on the MAAG policy while at the same time stating that the ARVN was ineffective due to the fact that General Williams had concentrated on conventional operations.¹⁷⁴ Williams in turn retorted that failure stemmed from Durbrow's mismanagement of the militias and his lack of support for Diem. Williams also blamed the ARVN for tactical failures accusing them of ignoring sound advice from American personnel. In turn ARVN generals pointed out that not all American advice and suggestions were effective or warranted. Finally Diem was becoming more and more hostile to Durbrow's *diktats* especially after he became convinced that Durbrow was behind a failed military coup in November 1960.¹⁷⁵

Washington's answer to the situation was to increase aid and replaced key personalities. By 1962 the RVN government was again on the offensive. The ARVN adopted flexible and aggressive tactics trying to engage the guerrillas in a series of continuous small unit operations ferreting out and destroying Vietcong combat units. The new aggressiveness stemmed in part from better officers coming from US or US supported schools but also from an increase in firepower and mobility. American helicopters were introduced in theatre to grant additional mobility while the introduction of modern armoured vehicles, in the

¹⁷³ Durbrow to State 3 May 1960, 27 July 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 150, Durbrow to Parsons, 27 July 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 182, Durbrow to State, 12 November 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 232

¹⁷⁴ Durbrow to State, 2 March 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 111; Durbrow to State, 7 March 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 112, Durbrow to State, 10 March 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 114, Durbrow to Parsons, 19 April 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 140, Durbrow to Parsons, 27 July 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 182, Parsons to Durbrow, 9 June 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 171; Williams to Meyers, 20 March 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, vol. 1, 121.

¹⁷⁵ Moyer, 'Triumph', p. 113.

form of the M113 Armoured Personnel Carrier, increased firepower. The Vietnamese Air Force received more modern and effective planes to compensate for the lack of substantial artillery support. The aggressiveness of the regular armed forces in turn permitted a rejuvenated civil guard to establish a foothold in the villages again. Successful military operations reduced support for the communist cause and further weakened the opposition to the government. The overall situation appeared to favour Saigon lending credence to optimistic reports originating from both the successor of MAAGV, the expanded Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), and the embassy in Saigon, now led by Ambassador Nolting.¹⁷⁶

The sudden reversal of fortune was thus not only an indigenous development but also a result of expanded American involvement. Bolder military actions had been made possible by new and more modern equipment appearing in country such as combat aircraft, armoured vehicles and more and better quality radios. American advisors increased in numbers and were spread out at lower organizational levels, and technical and specialist personnel were deployed to service the new equipment and provide specialized support to the ARVN such as with helicopter transports. ARVN combat efficiency was increased even if improvements were not uniform and effectiveness varied from unit to unit. Improvement accrued also from the willingness of several advisors to adapt to local conditions and work in concert with their Vietnamese counterparts to

¹⁷⁶ Frederick E. Nolting (1911-1989) was a career diplomat widely regarded at the time as one of the best officials in the State Department. He had previously worked with Secretary John Dulles and President Eisenhower appointed him as permanent alternate US representative to NATO in 1957.

improve and modify operational procedures that were not suited to local conditions. With the introduction of more advisors in the field and the authorization for these officers and enlisted men to accompany their counterparts on operations came also a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the local forces.

A textbook case is the employment of M113 Armoured Personnel Carriers in the Mekong Delta. As per US Army doctrine, M113s were to be used only to move infantry and provide long range fire support with their M2 heavy machine guns. Manuals postulated that, upon encountering enemy forces, the troops carried would have had to dismount and proceed on foot. Considering the limited armour thickness of the M113 this was a sound recommendation if the enemy had access to anti-tank weaponry. Yet operational employment in the Plain of Reeds area revealed that this operational concept was not suited to local conditions. When the APCs stopped to allow their infantry to disembark they lost attack momentum and became immobile targets. Furthermore, while the tracked vehicles were able to move unhindered in rice paddies, once deployed the infantry was literally stuck in the mud.¹⁷⁷ At the prompting of the commander of one of the two experimental mechanized units, Captain Ly Tong Ba, the operational procedures were changed allowing the infantry to fire from their carriers while moving. The M113 case also demonstrated some of the limits of American support. While their introduction and impromptu use as assault vehicles created a temporary shock effect benefitting government forces, the VC were able to introduce anti-tank weaponry and exploit the weaknesses of

¹⁷⁷ Don Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, (Washington: US Army 1989), pp. 23-24.

the M113 such as the exposed position of the vehicle commander/gunner reducing the effectiveness of the armoured vehicles on the local battlefields. In the long term even the M113, while successful and adapted to several different roles, did not prove a decisive factor on the battlefield.

If the problems experienced on the ground were, at least partially, identified and addressed, the initial phase of the communist insurgency in South Vietnam in 1960 exposed several shortcomings of the larger American COIN policy. The main issue was the lack of a real coordination between military and political agencies. While everyone had emphasized centralization and coordination of efforts by both military and civilian agencies, the experience of Vietnam illustrated that the different organizations were more interested in internecine fighting over control of the advisory and counterinsurgency programs rather than coordination. Despite continual emphasis in American military and political doctrine on the issue of centralized control and coordination of effort in Vietnam this synergy was never achieved. Repeated efforts by the Kennedy and then Johnson administrations to achieve this coordination were met with limited or non-existent progress. In Vietnam the lack of unity of effort between civilian and military agencies was a perverse by-product of the increase of effort in a situation short of open war. If, during the Korean War, the pre-eminence of the Far East Command, a military entity, was clearly defined, and, in other countries, usually activities were controlled by local authorities and coordinated by the ambassador or a specific control group, like Colonel Landsdale's mission in Manila, in Vietnam both the head of the MAAGV and the Ambassador vied for

control. Furthermore, the solution of these problems was outside the armed services control and reflected deeper issues of inter-department cooperation and national policy rather than military or doctrinal problems.

Even more important was the fact that only due to the close cooperation between Ambassador Nolting and Generals McGarr and Paul Harkins, McGarr's replacement, the American supporting effort had found a single focus rather than being embroiled in personal feuds.¹⁷⁸ The solution to the basic inter-agency turf war had been left to individuals rather than institutions. The various agencies had not done anything to institutionalize inter-agency cooperation in Vietnam leaving the problematic arrangements in place.

3.3 The Failure of Advice 1963-1964

Despite the steady government gains the favourable military situation was not translated into lasting political gains. While the expanded American support, coupled with renewed efforts by the South Vietnamese forces, improved security throughout the country the progress was easily reversible. The confidence of certain sectors of the American administration in the Saigon government was falling rapidly despite the success in the field. At the same time a strong criticism of the whole effort was expressed by certain areas of the

¹⁷⁸ Paul D. Harkins (1904-1984) was the last commander of the MAAGV and the First commander of the enlarged organization that replaced it, the MACV. He had a distinguished military career having served as deputy chief of staff in Patton's Third Army in 1944-45. He had also been Commandant of the Cadets at West Point and served in several staff roles at the pentagon working with State Department. In addition in his position as deputy commander, US Army Pacific (USRPAC) he was commander SEATO Field Forces during the 1960-61 Laotian crisis. During his tenure as MAAGV and MACV commander he became a controversial figure often accused to have lied to the government and the public on the progress of the war with his optimistic reports.

American media for real or alleged flaws in Diem's heavy handed policies. American internal troubles coincided with a reassessment of North Vietnam's goals and strategy; a reassessment brought in part by South Vietnamese military successes. Hanoi was also on the verge of changing its military approach from insurgency to conventional operations making Army counterinsurgency doctrine a moot point as far South Vietnam was concerned. The following turmoil also exposed again the weak links in the American command and control structure in Vietnam and underscored the ad hoc nature of the American COIN and military assistance effort at higher levels despite the existence of an accepted national doctrine.

Two key events characterized the 1963-1964 period. In the political arena a military coup replaced President Diem with an unstable series of military and civilian governments. While the coup was conducted by ARVN officers, it was engineered, supported and largely advocated by several American officials both in Saigon and Washington as a way to further United States aims in Vietnam.¹⁷⁹ On the military side Hanoi decided to escalate the struggle to a conventionally centred campaign designed to produce a swift victory.

With the replacement of Ambassador Nolting with Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon, the working arrangement between MACV, the US Embassy and the South Vietnamese government moved backwards.¹⁸⁰ Almost as soon as Lodge arrived

¹⁷⁹ Moyer, 'Triumph', pp. 239-243, 249-256, 261-266.

¹⁸⁰ Henry Cabot Lodge (1902-1985) was a controversial figure as far American diplomacy is concerned. He served several terms in the congress and was Nixon's vice-president nominee in the 1960 election. Yet he had also served as US ambassador to the United Nations (1953-1960) during Eisenhower presidency after losing his congress seat to John Kennedy. After Kennedy's election Lodge was seen as one of his potential rivals in the 1964 elections and thus Kennedy's

in Saigon the working relationship between the ambassador, Harkins and the duo of Diem and Nhu was in tatters displaying again the level of tension that had characterized the Williams-Durbrow period. Lodge was at odds with almost everyone in Saigon and with several members of the Kennedy's administration including Kennedy himself.¹⁸¹

While it can be argued that Lodge's personality played an important role in this situation, the roots of the problem were much more deeply ingrained in the entire advisory and support system. No one in Washington had yet resolved the problem of coordination between the civilian and military mission in Vietnam or in the similar situation at large. Lodge claimed that his authority extended over Harkins while, at the same time, Harkins was confident his mandate did not place him in a subordinate position to the embassy.¹⁸² The two were quickly in non-speaking terms. When a new MACV deputy commander was appointed in 1964, General William C. Westmoreland, Lodge attempted to use Westmoreland as his own military deputy further deteriorating the relationship with Harkins.¹⁸³

On top of that, the appointment of Lodge came during the worst political crisis for President Diem. An outbreak of civil disturbances on purported religious

decision to appoint him ambassador in South Vietnam is quite controversial. While it has been suggested that Kennedy sent him to Saigon both to have him out of Washington and to use him as scapegoat for eventual failures in Vietnam (Lodge replaced Nolting during the so called Buddhist crisis) Lodge was also enjoying considerable leverage because Kennedy was loath to be seen removing or chastising a political adversary. Moyar, 'Triumph', pp. 223, 259.

¹⁸¹ Recording of Meeting, 25 October 1963, Tape No. 117/A53, POF, Presidential Recordings, JFK Presidential Library.

¹⁸² William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, (Cambridge: Da Capo 1989), p. 68.

¹⁸³ William Child Westmoreland (1914-2005) is one of the most controversial figure in contemporary American Military history. He had a distinguished career in WW2 and Korea and was MACV commander from 1964 to 1968 presiding to the introduction of US combat units in Vietnam. While usually criticized as a narrow minded, unimaginative, and conventional commander he introduced COIN curriculum at West Point and was one of the early advocates of increased COIN effort in Vietnam until the 1964-65 PAVN offensive.

matters in Hue in May 1963 quickly spread out to other population centres in the republic.¹⁸⁴ While Diem reacted using the usual mixture of repression and appeasement that had characterized his presidency, this time the use of force created a strong international backlash especially in the US media and a section of the State department. Several elements of the State Department reached the conclusion that President Diem and his policies were an obstacle to American aims in South Vietnam. Ambassador Lodge was a strong exponent of the school of thought that assumed that remodelling countries in the image of the United States and Western democracies was the key factor in stopping insurrections and quickly aligned himself with this faction.

While this approach was in line with the national policy articulated in the September 1962 ODP, the conscious decision to accept socio-political reforming rather than repressive measures as the centrepiece in the effort to stem insurgency in Vietnam had the effect of relegating MACV's successful efforts to a second place in the heated debate that started in Washington in 1963. While several presidential advisers were staunchly opposed to the idea of removing Diem, the anti Diem faction was nevertheless able to press forward in some cases contravening Kennedy's instructions with their own plan until, in November 1963, they were able to engineer the coup overthrowing Diem and his family.

In the end, notwithstanding the aspirations and hopes of the American officials involved, the only practical results of the coup was the removal of a reasonably

¹⁸⁴ Moyer, 'Triumph', pp. 212-214.

stable government in Saigon and the initiation of a steady decline in ARVN and other RVN security forces performance and capabilities. Politically the November coup did nothing to appease the Buddhist opposition to the central government despite deals struck between several generals and the supposed leaders of the movement and greater concessions made by an increasingly weak central government. The new government did not even advance the social engineering effort espoused by Lodge and State department. Instead the constantly changing governments embarked in a series of purges of officers and officials suspected of 'Diemism', a term that was always changing meaning which only created more chaos.

Military incertitude at the top extended down the ranks, and constant purges robbed the army of the leadership it had painfully developed in the previous years. Loyalty to the current dominant faction, or association with the previous one, was more important than battlefield performance in retaining officers, and higher rank officers were more involved in planning coups and countercoups than administering their units.

It is also worth noting that the coup also violated one of the main tenets of both Army doctrine and of the ODP by transforming the Army into a political player. Despite his real or alleged failings, Ngo Dinh Diem and, in a lesser role, his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were the central figures who were keeping the entire government machine together. Once he had been killed by the conspirators, the Army was thrust in the forefront of politics and the leading and not so leading commanders and generals were bickering with each other trying to appoint

themselves to the highest positions.¹⁸⁵ American political advice become more and more imposing with both Ambassador Lodge and his replacement, retired General Maxwell Taylor, behaving much more as active players or as sort of heads of the Vietnamese state rather than ambassadors of a friendly nation.¹⁸⁶

While the political infighting in the capital would not have been a sufficient reason per se to reverse the steady gains made in 1962 and 1963, two factors contributed to the deterioration of the military situation. The ARVN combat effectiveness decreased with every purge of the officer corps made after every change in government. Of course not every Army formation or locale was in disarray. Elite units like the Rangers, the Airborne Brigade or the Vietnamese Marine Corps were still aggressive and proficient, but as a whole the progress in competence of the officer corps vanished or, at least, was temporarily superseded by faction loyalty. Compounding the political crisis, the firepower advantage that the ARVN had enjoyed in the previous period disappeared.

3.4 Invasion 1964-65

In such a chaotic situation the military situation collapsed quickly. The impressive government gains on the field made during the months preceding the coup were easily reversed. By early 1965 Saigon's government was losing. Elite units like the Rangers, Marines, and Airborne were suffering staggering losses, and large areas of territory were controlled by the Vietcong. Desertion rates in the Army were

¹⁸⁵ Until some sort of stability was reached in 1965 with the appointment of the unlikely duumvirate of Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu, coup and counter coups were happening on an almost regular monthly basis. These coups were often engineered by different Branches (armour, marines, paratroopers) or Corps to place their own commanders in power.

¹⁸⁶ Memcon, 21 December 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968* Vol. 1, 454.

as high as combat casualties. Reports from MACV varied from the pessimistic to the catastrophic. This situation has been used to claim that the gains were illusory or fabricated and that the Vietnam War was one of constant Allied failure. It has also been used to claim that the Allies, and especially the US Army, were fighting the wrong war. Still this critique did not take into consideration the shift in North Vietnamese military policies.

Several decisions had been made in Hanoi during 1963 to the effect to change the nature of war in South Vietnam. They stemmed from a striking conclusion: that the communists were losing the 'special', or unconventional, war they were waging.¹⁸⁷ Often overlooked in traditional interpretations this staggering conclusion was based on the fact that despite three years of operations the ARVN was still strong and had even started a counteroffensive. Hanoi officials' logic furthermore concluded that the situation could have been modified only by defeating government conventional conflict with communist conventional units.¹⁸⁸ Local insurgents lacked firepower, training and leadership to face the rejuvenated ARVN. Saigon's escalation in the special war had thus to be met by Hanoi's escalation to limited conventional warfare.¹⁸⁹ The alternative, withdrawal, was unthinkable for the hardliners in control of Hanoi's politburo.

Still, escalation to a limited war carried with it a potential grave danger. Introduction of conventional combat forces in South Vietnam was certain to set in motion a direct American intervention. Hanoi leadership had no doubt on that,

¹⁸⁷ Warren Wilikins, *Grab Their Belt to Fight Them, The Vietcong Big Unit War Against the US, 1965-1966*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute 2011), p. 127.

¹⁸⁸ Wilikins, 'Grab Their Belt', p. 60.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid*, p. 60.

yet they were gambling that any form of direct American intervention would have developed slowly and the limited war would have been completed before American forces would have been able to alter the outcome. This assumption was to have a significant effect on Hanoi's answer to the introduction of American forces in 1965.¹⁹⁰

Despite the reservations on the possibility of American direct involvement, escalating the war was always part of Hanoi's long term planning. In 1961 the Politburo had already decided to infiltrate between 30,000 and 40,000 regular troops to be able to create a force structure of 15 regular infantry regiments in the South. By the time of the November coup, the infiltration of these regular troops had almost been completely achieved. To a certain extent the change in the military balance would have happened even with Diem still in power, but with the November coup the introduction of larger communist combat units was to coincide with the already discussed decrease in ARVN combat effectiveness. Besides stepping up infiltration of troops, Hanoi increased and improved equipment reaching the point where 'the equipment of an enemy infantry platoon is less than that of our platoons.'¹⁹¹ By the end of 1964 ARVN units were constantly outgunned and had lost the firepower advantage they enjoyed in 1963. Armoured vehicles were countered by increased deployment of 57mm and 75mm recoilless rifles and by the issue of RPG2 rocket propelled grenades to infantry units. Helicopters were facing increased air defence fire from increasingly heavier machine guns and cannons. These events generated more

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 60.

¹⁹¹ Report MACV, Sep. 9 1964 Sub: Analysis of VC Document entitled: Preliminary Study of RVNAF Combat Potential Up to March 1964, pp. 2-3, Historian Files CMH.

and more battlefield defeats and loss of population and territory. By end of 1964 the Vietcong and the PAVN had started to launch regimental and divisional sized operations as in the case of the divisional attack on Bin Gia and the regimental size attack at Nam Dong Special Forces camp. In both occasions communist forces had the government forces outgunned and outnumbered. At Nam Dong, according to comments made by Colonel Francis 'Ted' Serong of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATV), the attackers were not local forces but PAVN regulars.¹⁹² While the Australian comments were not reprised by MACV and the attack was attributed to the Viet Cong, in the same time period Special Forces operating from Vietnam did indeed make contact with PAVN forces and recover PAVN gear.

In the period between 1963 and 1965 the whole nature of the war in Vietnam had significantly changed. The attempts by the US Army to just continue on the path of a conventional COIN approach based on small units and civic action were met by failure. In 1964 MACV and the South Vietnamese government created and implemented a large scale pacification effort called Hop Tac. The plan was predicated on less ambitious goals than the nationwide plans implemented during Diem's administration and, instead, concentrated on the area around Saigon.¹⁹³ While the plan was a model of COIN operations, it failed when the Vietcong simply answered by increasing the military pressure on ARVN units

¹⁹² B. Davies, G. McKay, *The Men who Persevered*, (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin 2005) pp.151-152.

¹⁹³ Hop Tac was a short term pacification program designed to bolster government presence in the areas surrounding saigon through saturation of those areas with government forces. MACV Command History, 1964, pp. 67-70, hereafter MACV yearly command histories will be abbreviated as MACV followed by year; Operations Order Hop Tac 1, Hq III Corps, 12 Aug 64. File MACJ3, CMH; Graham Cosmas, *MACV: The joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, (Washington: CMH, 2006) pp. 142-143.

tasked with the clearing operations and with attacks in other provinces designed to remove enemy forces from the Hop Tac area.¹⁹⁴

General Westmoreland thus realized the futility of adhering closely to the basic counterinsurgency doctrine as it had been formulated in 1961, as it was not working anymore. He came to the conclusion that the war was indeed escalating. His remark on 'bullies and termites' clarifies his thinking. By 1965 he correctly identified two threats to South Vietnam, one posed by internal subversion and one by an ongoing external invasion as well as the need to confront both of them. He also reached the conclusion that the external threat was the more pressing. South Vietnam, in his analysis, would never have survived even a limited conventional assault.¹⁹⁵

His assessment was based both on the experiences of the previous months and the intelligence analysis that he was receiving.¹⁹⁶ Several of the previous engagements between government and opposition forces had escalated to the size of full conventional battles with several battalions manoeuvring on both sides. On a superficial analysis the conflict had reached the third stage of the Maoist popular warfare, the switch to conventional operations. But besides these major operations the 'insurgency' was still going on. On this subject it is interesting to note that MACV never defined the war as a conventional one but

¹⁹⁴ Moyer, 'Triumph', p. 365.

¹⁹⁵ Andrade & Willbanks, 'Cords/Phoenix', p. 10.

¹⁹⁶ The first reports of presence of regular North Vietnamese combat units had been forwarded by South Vietnamese sources in 1964, but American intelligence assets failed to confirm these reports until 1965.

referred to a switch 'from guerrilla warfare to a more conventionally organized general offensive'.¹⁹⁷

The conflict had reached the point feared by General Palmer with both conventional and unconventional warfare existing in the same time and place. If the ARVN troops were employed according to the COIN orthodoxy they were annihilated piecemeal. If they manoeuvred in regiments and divisions they were simply losing the control of large swaths of the countryside. The show case of this dilemma was the situation in Binh Dinh province in 1964 as described by Westmoreland himself. He prodded the ARVN to operate in small units according to COIN principles and achieved several successes in disrupting enemy political organizations in the area. The immediate result was to have enemy regular units moved to the area with the express purpose of defeating government units in detail and forcing the survivors to hole up in fortified bases unable to actively contest the areas against a resurgent enemy political movement that, once unchecked by small patrols, promptly resurfaced.¹⁹⁸ The logical conclusion of this experience was summarized by Westmoreland: 'ignore big units and you court disaster...failure to go after them in at least comparable strength invited defeat.'¹⁹⁹

The deteriorating situation in the field acted as the background for a renewed round of discussions in Washington on the usefulness and wisdom of a direct commitment of American forces to Vietnam. While the first of such proposals

¹⁹⁷ U.S.G. Sharp, William Westmoreland, 'Report on the War in Vietnam', pp. 84, 88, Vietnam Centre and Archive, Allan J Lavelle Collection Box #: 01, Folder #: 20; D110.4A; D110.2.

¹⁹⁸ Sharp & Westmoreland, 'Report on the War', p. 88.

¹⁹⁹ Westmoreland, 'Soldier Reports' pp. 99-100.

had been floated by General Taylor when Diem was still in power, the idea of using American forces did not gather momentum until 1964, and, even then, there was no agreement in Washington. Only in late 1964, with the ARVN in disarray, the commitment of American troops was seen as the only solution by several authorities, but domestic political needs, fear on the stability of the Khanh government in Saigon and lack of unanimous consensus on the mission made the first deployment of combat troops almost an afterthought. Despite the mounting pressure, President Johnson was resisting calls for military action.²⁰⁰ While the administration had correctly blamed Hanoi for the escalation it had also decided that the best way to deal with it was first with increased covert actions (OPLAN 34A) followed by air strikes over the North.²⁰¹ Only after it was decided to mount air strikes against North Vietnam, the matter of the employment of American ground combat units in Vietnam was confronted again. Then it was decided first to send antiaircraft missiles to protect airbases and then for security reason ground troops to protect both the bases and the missiles. The first two infantry battalions, namely two battalions from the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, were committed not to save the ARVN but to protect the airfield at Da Nang that was selected to host several fighter-bomber squadrons slated to participate in the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Following the Marines, the 173rd Airborne Brigade was sent to Bien Hoa, in the Saigon area, to protect the local airbase hosting USAF squadrons.

²⁰⁰ Moyer, 'Triumph', p. 341; Johnson to McNamara Telcon, 26 February 1965, Tape WH6502.06, Telephone Conversation Recordings, LBJ Presidential Library, Austin.

²⁰¹ Van Staaveren, 'Gradual Failure', pp. 61-63; Cosmas, 'Escalation', pp. 157-160.

If there was a large consensus on the necessity to 'do something' there was no definite consensus on what to do, and the administration seemed to have worked more on an ad hoc basis than following a precise plan. Sending the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade to protect Da Nang had been a relatively easy decision, but what to do with the Marines once they were ashore was measurably more difficult. While Johnson and his advisers had decided that Vietnam had to be saved, how to do that was the real point of contention.

Pressuring Hanoi to stop sending men and materials was one way, but even the supporters of the air campaign conceded that pressuring the North Vietnamese would have taken time that was seemingly in short supply in the South. Using American forces to stem the tide in the South and then taking decisive action was recommended by the Army. In addition, Marine officers in Da Nang were clamouring for an expanded combat role for local security reasons. Also there were strong differences of opinions between Taylor and Westmoreland. Taylor still saw the war as an orthodox counterinsurgency and pacification campaign. Westmoreland was by now fully persuaded that the enemy conventional forces were the ones causing the current emergency, they had to be confronted by conventional measures, and the ARVN was no longer in any position to deal with the enemy. In the end it was the situation on the ground that forced a decision. On June 9th 1965 the Special Forces camp at Dong Xoai was attacked by enemy forces starting a prolonged battle that mauled several South Vietnamese units to the point that Westmoreland was persuaded that the ARVN was no longer capable retrieving the situation and notified Washington that, lacking contrary

instructions, he was committing elements of the 173rd Brigade to the fight. Airborne troopers were duly alerted and prepared for action. McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and President Johnson concurred.²⁰² In the end, airpower saved the day and the paratroopers were not needed, but the administration was forced to confront the Vietnam problem in a coherent manner and urged a multi-department approach. In the following week, increases in American combat troops were authorized and complete divisions were slated for deployment. In addition, MACV was now tasked to win the war in the South.

3.5 An Army in Search of a Mission

With the landing of the Marines at Da Nang and the deployment of the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa, the conflict in Vietnam definitely changed its shape. From the American perspective it ceased to be a counterinsurgency campaign managed by advisors and became, for all practical purposes, a war with US armed forces taking an active role. With the commitment of US ground combat units to Vietnam, the war had entered its American phase; the American role moved from advice and support to direct combat. Not only the American role had changed but also the threat faced by the Allied forces. The threat MACV was facing in 1965 was completely different from the threat MAAGV had faced in 1960. To a certain extent the change in the threat had been prompted by the successful implementation of an effective COIN campaign early on exacerbated by the self-inflicted wound caused by the decision of several American diplomats

²⁰² Moyer, 'Triumph', pp. 401-402.

to overthrow the local government, but it was also affected by Hanoi's growing impatience with its own strategy playing a critical role in the deteriorating security situation in the South. From that point onward the war evolved in two discrete but interconnected directions. One was the 'strategic' campaign waged against North Vietnam, the source of the troubles; the other was the effort to destroy the enemy in South Vietnam. How General Westmoreland and his staff perceived the threat in the South and devised a strategy to restore the situation was thus critical for the prosecution of the war.

3.6 Bullies and Termites, toward a Campaign Plan, 1965

Securing permission to employ US combat units to react to emergencies was one thing. Devising a full scale campaign plan for Vietnam was another especially in light of the severe limitation imposed on MACV from Washington and on the divided nature of the in-theatre command. Additional constraints were imposed by the nature of the threat. By August 1965 the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) had already sent several regiments across RVN borders in various places and military operations were then conventional in nature.

It is thus quite unsurprising that the results of MACV deliberations focused on the immediate conventional threats; in 1965 there was no alternative.²⁰³ Westmoreland decided for a two pronged strategy to oppose both the conventional and guerrilla threat. Large American and Allied formations would have actively engaged their opposite numbers as frequently as logistic and

²⁰³ Palazzo, 'Military Operations', p. 32; MACV, 1965, pp. 14-15.

operational considerations would have permitted in reaction operations.²⁰⁴ As soon additional resources would have been deployed to Vietnam reactive operations would have been replaced by offensive sweeps designed to invade and destroy enemy base areas. Even if the enemy forces refused to engage, it was hoped that relocation and destruction of enemy logistic facilities would have reduced their ability to operate freely in South Vietnam.²⁰⁵ Behind this largely American shield, RVN forces would have recuperated and provided local security and slowly but steadily expanded government control over the countryside. Using Westmoreland's own metaphor, the American troops would have chased away the bullies while the South Vietnamese would have cleared the termites from the house. The plan as initially envisioned and refined was a strong departure from the accepted COIN approach and from ODP assumptions. US forces would have in fact taken over a large slice of the war. To a certain extent it also represented the acceptance of the failure of the Army COIN doctrine to resolve an escalating insurgency.

Westmoreland's approach rested on several critical strengths and was designed to overcome several key weaknesses of an intervention force. Far from attempting to transform Vietnam into Central Germany, MACV planners tried to adapt to a highly complex situation. Two main considerations rested at the centre of MACV's concept of operations: the dual nature of the threat and the time requirement of American intervention. By 1965 South Vietnam was in real

²⁰⁴ MACV, 1965, pp. 141, 144-146.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 161.

danger of being overwhelmed by large communist formations.²⁰⁶ Any American intervention had to stem this tide before tackling any other issue. Conventional firepower was killing ARVN soldiers in scores. Failure in conventional warfare had brought US ground forces in Vietnam in the first instance and pressured Washington into employing them in an offensive role. Acceptance of the fact that the opposition had turned Vietnam into a firepower and attrition contest in turn forced MACV to rely on firepower to stem PAVN and PLAF forces but also to do this without destroying the entire country in the process especially considering that logistical considerations forced a gradual introduction of American and Allied troops. The battlefields would thus have to be removed from populated areas as far possible to allow for unrestrained use of US firepower and also to create a barrier between enemy main forces and civilian population. While the plan did not envision the employment of US Army or USMC units in extended pacification roles, it did not exclude it altogether even if it placed pacification and security firmly on the shoulders of the ARVN.²⁰⁷

The plan has been subjected to strong criticisms. It has been described as an overly conventional approach to an insurgency. The division of roles between US and Allied forces and indigenous RVN troops has been criticized both as a way to eschew pacification and as a way to shun the ARVN out of the war. It has also been called inflexible. None of these criticisms are warranted. MACV had never underestimated the importance of the insurgency; it had simply recognized that the situation had evolved to a point where conventional fighting was the most

²⁰⁶ MACV, 1965, pp. 15, 141; Message Saigon to State 11 Nov 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968* Vol.3, 199.

²⁰⁷ MACV, 1965, p. 137.

immediate threat. MACV planners also stressed the limits of the ability of US forces to effectively operate in extensively populated areas. US forces were not familiar with the Vietnamese culture, language, or local customs. Their role in security operations was thus bound to be limited and mainly auxiliary. Only Vietnamese security forces had the experience and skills required to screen the local population. It also recognized that pacification was dependent on military security. Without a strong shield deployed to protect the forces engaged in patrolling and security operations these forces would not have been able to perform their own missions. Engaging large enemy forces close to populated areas would have resulted in excessive collateral damage notwithstanding that the rules of engagement designed to limit civilian casualties and reduced application of firepower would have resulted in higher Allied casualties. Later in the war when Allied forces were forced to engage communist units in urban battles these problems evidenced themselves.

As an example, in August 1967, the PAVN 95th Infantry Regiment attacked and occupied several hamlets west of the city of Tuy Hoa in the South Korean TAOR. Korean and ARVN forces decided to 'risk taking casualties over using firepower indiscriminately'.²⁰⁸ Allied forces took severe casualties, and, when in September the same PAVN unit staged a repeat of the August attack, Allied forces responded with overwhelming firepower. While the 95th Regiment was again defeated collateral damage was considerable and included 3'700 dwellings

²⁰⁸ George MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*, (Washington: Center of Military History, 1998), p. 314.

destroyed.²⁰⁹ Despite the common caricature of guerrillas wearing back pyjamas, the enemy in Vietnam was an highly trained and well equipped conventional force capable of dishing out and accepting heavy punishment. A COIN campaign like the one conducted by the British and Commonwealth armies in Malaya was out of question. The suggestion made by Krepinevich to convert all the US Army units in Vietnam to light infantry units and just rely on a handful of airmobile units as reserves was equally ludicrous and ignored the realities of actual combat in Vietnam.²¹⁰

3.7 The Right Direction?

MACV strategy was, at the time, quite clear. American combat troops had to be employed in large scale operations to stem the tide. Even more importantly, there was no alternative in 1965.²¹¹ Actual operations in 1965 and 1966 confirm this assumption. PAVN units did not shy away from large scale combat and were instead employed in larger and larger groupings in an attempt to overwhelm US forces.

While still strongly criticized, the decision to employ large American units against PAVN formations was actually correct. In 1965 there were no real alternatives. The US Army had spent four years employing a largely orthodox COIN strategy in Vietnam, and despite a combination of lack of strategic clarity at the higher levels of national decision making and lack of consistent relations

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 314.

²¹⁰ Dale Andrade, Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War in 2008, p. 147; Krepinevich, 'Army and Vietnam', pp. 259, 268.

²¹¹ Palazzo, 'Military Operations', p. 32.

between Washington and Saigon, the approach had provided several notable successes. Yet, military successes had always been thwarted by enemy escalation. The Politburo in Hanoi had decided to shift the nature of the war due to their lack of consistent success. American actions were thus only reactive in nature at least until some sort of shift in military initiative could have been obtained. Staving off defeat was, in 1965, paramount. Just concentrating on guerrilla formations and ignoring large enemy units would not have solved the main problem of a communist general offensive nor influenced the outcome of the political struggle in any meaningful way.

Besides theoretical points about the prominence of the conventional or unconventional threat there was the military reality that by mid-1965 PAVN and Main Force VC units had already mauled large RVN formations in several engagements. They possessed sufficient firepower to make costly any COIN operations in their areas. The criticism that the US Army decided on a largely conventional strategy because that was just a reflection of their own perceptions and culture and because the Army generals did not like COIN ignored the reality of the situation. US forces were sent to Vietnam because the PAVN was literally eating ARVN combat battalions and massing division sized units. The November 1965 battles in the Ia Drang valley or the 1966 campaign in the III CTZ near Saigon demonstrated the PAVN reliance on large scale units. Also, while the campaign plan was indeed focused on reducing the conventional threat to the survival of South Vietnam it did not ignore pacification and security. Every US and Allied formation was, despite prolonged misconceptions, involved in civic

actions and pacification support; furthermore, even large scale operations did contribute to the COIN campaign providing the missing link in conventional critique.

Certainly Westmoreland's campaign plan did not reflect a limited mind focused on large battles and senseless attrition. While attrition was a goal, disruption of enemy operations was also a significant goal. More importantly both of them were operational goals designed to achieve a more permissive environment where orthodox COIN could have been pursued again.²¹² MACV's plan was also constrained by political limitations such as the cross border sanctuary and divided command responsibilities as well as severe logistical constraints. To a certain extent even the old 'praetorian' school championed by Harry Summers never explained how MACV could have mounted an invasion of Laos or North Vietnam in 1965. Focusing on the most immediate threats was thus a sensible approach. Quoting Dale Andrade, Westmoreland was indeed right.²¹³

²¹² MACV, 1965, p. 161; MACV Directive 525-4, 17 September 1965, subject: Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam, Westmoreland History files, 29 Aug-24 Oct 1965 CMH.

²¹³ Andrade, 'Westmoreland was right', p. 145.

Chapter 4: Marines and Strategy, 1965-1966

4.1 Introduction

The landing at Da Nang suddenly thrust the US Marine Corps in what had, until then, been a largely Army effort. From a handful of advisers working with the Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) and some staff officers in Saigon, the USMC involvement escalated first to a full brigade then to two reinforced divisions.

Without a real institutional commitment to counterinsurgency doctrine and lacking in country experience or even a sizeable presence, the USMC had to fashion a coherent plan to implement the rapidly changing instructions from Washington and Saigon from scratch. The lack of a sizeable in-country team meant that intelligence on Vietnam was scarce and often not up to date, a problem compounded by the secrecy surrounding the advisory effort with the VNMC. In addition, as it will be explained, the Corps, at least at higher levels, endorsed a strategic vision completely different from the one that Westmoreland shaped in Saigon. This vision associated to geographical peculiarities, logistic considerations and inter-service rivalries conspired to drive the USMC to have, at least initially, a completely different approach to the conflict.

First, USMC responsibility was geographically limited. A combination of circumstances placed the Marines only in the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. While MACV fashioned a nationwide strategy, the USMC command in Vietnam, the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), concentrated only on a single Corps Tactical Zone. Second, the Marines, except for a very brief initial

period, were not logistically dependent on MACV. Their supplies were coming from the US Navy supply chain and not from the Army dominated MACV.

The last and more important factor in the Corps' approach was the convoluted command relationship between Westmoreland and the commander of the III MAF. In theory, the III MAF was supposed to be one of the field force headquarters through which Westmoreland was exercising operational command over American forces in Vietnam. Yet the III MAF was also a component command of the Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPAC) under General Krulak. As part of FMFPAC, the III MAF was reporting directly to Admiral Sharp in Honolulu and to the USMC commandant, General Greene, in Washington and skipping MACV altogether. This situation was awkward and prone to abuse, and, when the initial commander of the III MAF, General Collins, was replaced by General Walt, the command relationship became even more strained as it will be discussed below.

The Marine's high level leadership were routinely ignoring MACV orders and directives when they felt USMC interests were jeopardized. In addition, both Krulak and Greene had their own ideas on what the Marines were supposed to do in Vietnam and were willing to use the peculiar chain of command to make the III MAF enact them without submitting their proposal to MACV or the embassy in Saigon.

Westmoreland was aware of the situation, felt that he was not able to challenge it and resorted to 'guiding' rather than ordering III MAF. It was a very inefficient arrangement, and it created countless difficulties. Yet this created a manoeuvre

space that allowed, at least until 1967, the III MAF to conduct operations as an independent entity from MACV.



Figure 1: South Vietnam 1965 from Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 306

4.2 The I Corps Tactical Zone

While the political nature of the commitment of ground combat troops to Vietnam was at best uncertain and tentative, the actual deployment of units followed more or less the directive of OPLAN 32, the contingency plan for defending South Vietnam from a cross border invasion.²¹⁴ Marine units were thus fed into the area they were expected to occupy and defend by the original plan. In OPLAN 32, the allocation of the 3rd Marine Division to the northern part of South Vietnam stemmed from the idea to use it to block an enemy thrust southward from the demilitarized zone dividing the two Vietnams due to the rapid deployment capability of the Marine units through amphibious landing. For the actual deployment the fact that Marines were already deployed to Da Nang only reinforced this decision.

Yet the combination of existing planning and expediency forced the Marines to assume responsibility for one of the most difficult areas of the country both from a geographical and military standpoint.

In 1965 Vietnam was divided in four large administrative and military zones, the four Corps Tactical Zones, and a small special zone around the Capital, Saigon.

²¹⁴ Cosmas, 'Escalation', p. 188; COMUSMACV OPLAN 32-64-PH II (RVN) 1 May 1964, Historian Files CMH; Memo Westmoreland to Taylor 5 Mar 65, Ground Force Deployments into South Vietnam, Box 68A1395, RG334, NARA.

The First Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ) comprised five provinces, from north to south: Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai. These five province encompassed three of the biggest cities of South Vietnam, Quang Tri, Hue (Thua Thien) and Da Nang (Quang Nam), as well as a sizeable percentage of South Vietnamese population both urban and rural.

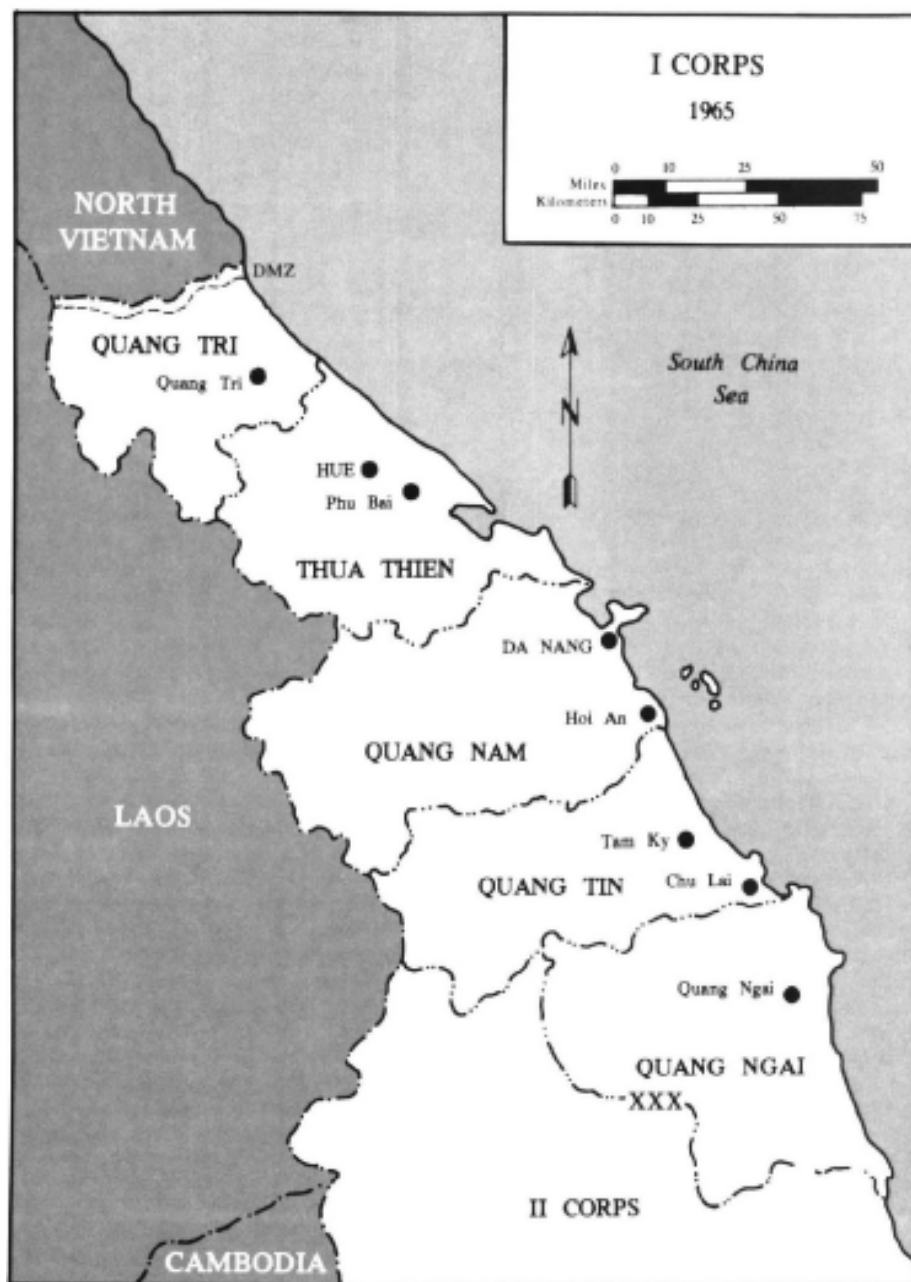


Figure 2: The I CTZ and its component provinces (Shulimson & Johnson, 1978, p. 13)

Da Nang was at the time the second largest deep sea harbour of South Vietnam, the first being Saigon itself, and it housed one of the largest airports that in 1965 was being enlarged for use by US air assets. Yet the real critical point of the region was the old imperial city of Hue. Large, densely populated and filled with historic landmarks, the symbolic value of the city had already been recognized by both sides making its defence a priority for the South Vietnamese government.

The cities and the majority of the local population were concentrated in the relatively narrow coastal plain bordering the South China Sea coast. The coastal plain was, and is, extensively settled and cultivated, with countless towns, large and small, villages, fields and paddies crisscrossed by rivers, canals and a network of local roads. The coast was dominated by sandy beach and lagoon.

Moving westward from the plain, the rice paddies and the villages were replaced by the foothills announcing the real geographical landmark of the region, the Annamite Mountains, the Chaine Annamitique. With peaks rising as high as 8000 feet in the two northern provinces and with the average height comprised between 4000 and 7000 feet the Annamite Mountains shaped the entire area not just the region. The chain originates in China and then follows the length of Indochina until terminating north of Saigon. In the region, besides acting as an east-west divide between Vietnam and Laos, a big 'spur' pointed toward the coast along the border between Thua Thien and Quang Nam divides the area in two separate and not fully connected halves. From a military standpoint this division would have significant consequences especially because the real political

key of the region, Hue, was located in the northern half while the major economic centre, Da Nang, was located in the southern portion.

To the west of the chain the inhabited area was replaced by an almost primeval interior with steep valleys, long winding water courses and even canyons. East-west communications were only possible using the few valleys, often subjected to seasonal flooding, that cross the chain. From a military standpoint the valleys were the only way to perform east-west movement without recourse to air transportation. Yet the existing infrastructure could have been defined at best as poor and at worst non-existent. In the French Colonial period, roads had been pushed into these valleys departing from the Route Coloniale 1 (RC 1). In Quang Tri, the Route Coloniale 9 (RC 9), an 'all weather' hardened road left Dong Ha to reach the Laotian border near a village called Khe Sanh and then Laos proper. In Thua Thien, the Route 547, 'extremely primitive road', linked Hue to Laos crossing the border along the A Shau Valley.²¹⁵ Besides these two roads only Route Laterale 4 (LTL 4) crossed the interior of the I CTZ connecting the small town of Hoi Han in Quang Nam to Kontum in the Central Highlands and the II CTZ. No other major communication network was available outside the coastal plain due to insurgent activity, lack of economic interest in the highlands and, with the almost complete cessation of trade with Laos, the non-coastal portion of the

²¹⁵ Willard Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, (Washington: US Army, 1975), p. 4. The RC 9 was the first real road to connect Laos and Vietnam. It was defined as an all-weather metalled road, but in reality the route was in such a poor state that several tracts were little more than a dirt trail. Pictures show a simple bulldozed track covered in red dust. In November 1959, even before the start of NLF insurrection, the road was considered so insecure for traffic that funding for a major maintenance program was requested from Saigon to Washington. Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 10.

majority of those roads was, as the Marines would soon discover, existing only on maps having been abandoned and reclaimed by the jungle.

Yet even without proper roads those valleys were still an important conduit for military movement. For the North Vietnamese and Allies respectively, they were 'highways' used to infiltrate men and supplies from Laos and chokepoints useful to halt that infiltration.

Both the Allies and the North Vietnamese had recognized the importance of such valleys and a sustained campaign for their control was already being waged. While the ARVN had been more or less pushed out of A Shau and the RC 9, a series of camps staffed by US Army Special Forces, their Vietnamese counterparts and indigenous militias had set up to control the cross border valleys in the I CTZ and almost everywhere along the South Vietnamese border. Those camps had already attracted the unwelcome attention of NLF forces, and, in some instances, North Vietnamese regular formations. The I CTZ had been spared from such large scale attacks. Regular North Vietnamese troops had been constantly reported and, in one instance, encountered along the track of RC 9 especially near a local village called Khe Sanh, but, despite minor incidents and low level harassment, the valleys had been relatively peaceful.²¹⁶ Elsewhere, the camps had become the focus of major confrontations as in the case of the assault on the camp at Dong Xoai that had been an important factor in expanding the American role in the conflict.

²¹⁶ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 16-19; Samuel Zaffiri, *Hamburger Hill: The Brutal Battle for Dong Ap Bia, May 11-20, 1969*, (New York: Ballantine) 1988, pp. 16-17.

Yet the remoteness of these valleys was not the only issue associated with them. Besides being major communication avenues they also hosted the majority of the sparse settlements outside the coastal plain. The geographical divide created by the Annamite Mountains had extended also to a cultural level. While the coast was settled by the Vietnamese ethnic population sustained by agriculture and trade, the interior's sparse settlements were populated by non-Vietnamese ethnic minorities surviving through hunting, gathering and occasional trade with the coast. The two ethnic groups had a long history of mutual distrust if not outright conflict. In the eyes of the majority of Vietnamese, mountain dwellers were little more than barbarians. While this hostility was certainly a positive factor for the US Special Forces militia programs, NLF and NVA forces were mainly ethnic Vietnamese, it created continuous friction between the tribes and Saigon's government complicating military operations.²¹⁷

The military situation reflected the geographical patterns. The area capital and the headquarters of the ARVN I Corps were located in Da Nang controlling two infantry divisions, 1st Infantry and 2nd Infantry, plus several smaller units. The ARVN 1st Infantry Division was headquartered at Hue and its units scattered mainly in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. The ARVN 2nd Infantry Division was responsible for the rest of the corps area, and its headquarters was located in Quang Ngai. With a total of 18 infantry battalions, the two regular divisions were clearly overstretched, and the bulk of those 18 manoeuvre battalions was relegated to static defensive missions protecting the three major cities, the larger towns and securing Highway 1. Operations in the interior had to be

²¹⁷ Cosmas, 'Escalation', pp. 145-146; MACV, 1964, pp. 122-124.

conducted employing the strategic reserve units of the ARVN, mainly the airborne battalions. Supporting the two regular divisions there were several Ranger battalions and an assorted array of local militias and paramilitary forces. The ARVN troops were usually content to protect the coastal lowlands and to mount periodic sweeps in the hinterlands. As it has been already mentioned, the only long term presence in the hinterlands was assured by the Special Forces camps that, while manned by a combination of US and South Vietnamese personnel, were part of a CIA sponsored program that had been then transferred to MACV directly thus being outside of the South Vietnamese chain of command.

Complicating the lack of available forces were several political factors. The importance of Hue city could not have been overstated. Control of the city was indeed one of the primary campaign goals of the PAVN and NLF. Losing Hue would have certainly shaken South Vietnam to its foundations. To protect the city, the bulk of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division was stationed in and around it, and those battalions were not considered available for mobile operations. Complicating the situation, Hue was only 50 km from the DMZ dividing the South from the North. The idea of Hanoi sending several divisions across the DMZ was considered unlikely until 1964, but in 1965 intelligence on PAVN movement into Laos and Cambodia and evidence of PAVN troops inside South Vietnam made this occurrence more and more likely. Thus the rest of the 1st Infantry Division had to protect Quang Tri.

This left only the portion of the 2nd Infantry Division not involved in protecting Da Nang and the other coastal towns free for manoeuvring. But even this was only a theoretical reserve.

Besides the presence of the old imperial capital and of the DMZ, the I CTZ had also other peculiarities that separated it from the rest of the country. The bulk of the South Vietnamese Buddhist community was concentrated there. While the exact numerical importance of this community in the overall religious makeup of Vietnam is still unclear, it is also unclear how much the militant Buddhist movement was representing the community at large or only a vocal minority. Yet the fact was both Hue and Da Nang had been hotbeds of religious unrest from the end of Diem's regime onward. Hue had been the city where the 1963 Buddhist uprising started. The uprising played a major role in the fall of President Ngo Diem. The city itself was still the centre of serious disturbances in 1964 and 1965. In 1966 Hue and Da Nang were the centres of large scale riots and military mutinies again.

These political problems only reinforced the necessity for the bulk of ARVN regular formations to both protect and control the coastal lowlands and their big cities leaving the rest of the region to unsupported regional paramilitary forces and the occasional sortie of the elite units of the strategic reserve.

The last peculiarity of the region was the local ARVN commander himself. I Corps was commanded by Lieutenant General Nguyen Chanh Thi.²¹⁸ Thi was a

²¹⁸ Lieutenant General Nguyen Chanh Thi (1923-2007) was a controversial figure. He had entered the army during the French period and all his training had been under French instructors. He was a paratrooper and as used his position as the commander of the airborne brigade to attract

strange pick as the commander of the region. He was an opponent of the two generals then in control of Saigon, Thieu and Ky and, after the fall of Khan's government, was not really popular in the circle of high ranking South Vietnamese officers. Besides being a sort of political opponent of then current leadership he was suspected to have connections with the same Buddhist movement that stirred troubles in the area. He was also known to have cast his ambitions on the position of prime minister or president.

Yet because of the distance between Da Nang and Saigon, the fact any interference could have been portrayed as a political ploy and, lastly, because of his Buddhist connections, Thi had a virtual free hand in running his corps. When the Marines landed at Da Nang, they needed Thi's approval as well as the government's for performing any kind of activity. For practical purposes for several months they had been virtually placed under his control. Later, when the

attention of president diem , but then he led the first aborted coup against him in 1960. He left South Vietnam to return only after 1963 coup.

After returning to Vietnam he was immediately named deputy I Corps commander under Khan. Then he participated in the coup against general Minh. Khan rewarded him first with the command of the prestigious 1st Infantry Division and then with I Corps command.

As a military commander he was rated as a very poor one by Westmoreland, Lodge and Taylor yet General Walt had a certain confidence in him. He professed to be a staunch anti-communist yet both the RVN government and the CIA station at Saigon feared he wanted to create an independent neutralist state in his area of responsibility. He had been involved in several coups and countercoups in Saigon, often being the deciding factor with his I Corps. He had been a stalwart ally of General Khanh, but he had suddenly deserted him after being instrumental in repelling the last coup against him. Possible reasons could have been the waning of US support for Khan and the fact that Thi was feeling ready to try to grab the final prize. Yet the military council had appointed Ky and Thieu as prime minister and president apparently after his refusal to take the position. When the RVN government replaced him in 1966 the I CTZ witnessed a sort of mutiny of several units especially from the 2nd infantry division around Da-Nang that disrupted operations and created tensions between MACV supporting the RVN on one side and General Walt supporting Thi on the other. While there is no definite evidence to substantiate any accuse against him certainly he was much more involved in politics than the average ARVN corps commander and certainly more interested in advancing his political aims rather than combat operations. Due to his uneven career he also lacked command experience at division level (this in an army where this kind of experience was not very common). In his tenure the I corps never operated as a coherent entity but as a collection of separate divisions and assorted formations.

9th MEB was expanded into the III MAF, the MAF commander, General Walt, became also the senior adviser of General Thi.

It can be safely said that Thi was concerned with the presence of American troops in his area. If, on one side, he welcomed them and the fact that they significantly increased his available manpower on the other he felt the idea of American troops performing actual combat operations or operating in the middle of civilian population threatening and dangerous. It is worthwhile to note that, even when restrictions on Marine operations were gradually relaxed from Washington, he continued to pose restrictions and vehemently opposed extension of their area of operations.

The overall effect of all these peculiarities coupled with the general problem of South Vietnam, lack of infrastructure, a perceived poor terrain and an alien population conspired in creating a very difficult geographical and military picture for any coherent strategy. More than a single entity the region was a series of populated enclaves bordered by mountain range with limited communications between them. Additionally every single doctrinally important factor in the I CTZ (Hue, Da Nang and the Vietnamese ethnic population) was located inside these enclaves leaving an apparently barren and useless interior.

5.3 The Creation of the III MAF

Besides the disadvantageous situation in the I CTZ, the Marines also had to face a rapidly expanding commitment and mission. In the first five months of their presence in Vietnam, the Marines expanded their deployed force from two battalions to a division, and their role also expanded exponentially. What had

started as a limited airfield defence mission was now a full-fledged combat deployment. This created an initial confusion about roles and a less than optimal development of the planning process.

The first troops waded ashore at Da Nang on March 8th. Their mission was quite clear: protect the Airfield at Da Nang and the already deployed missile batteries there from a direct North Vietnamese attack. Yet the orders they received were quite restrictive. On March 7th the final operation order specified 'the US Marines will not, repeat will not, engage in day to day actions against the Viet Cong.'²¹⁹ Furthermore MACV highlighted that the Marines' area of responsibility included only the airbase: 'overall responsibility for the defense of Da Nang Area remains a RVNAF responsibility.'²²⁰

Less than 20 days later MACV was already expanding the Marines' missions. In the March 26th 'Commander's Estimate' the local situation had deteriorated so much that not only further troops were required but also an expanded mission.²²¹ Marine responsibility was to include not only Da Nang but also a small local airfield near Hue called Phu Bai.²²² A reinforced Marine brigade was added to the force earmarked for Vietnam. Furthermore, at the end of April 1st

²¹⁹ Msg Wheeler JCS to Sharp CinCPac, dtd 6Mar65, Pentagon Papers, book 4, sec. IV-C-4, p. 1.

²²⁰ Westmoreland order to Karch, non dated, quoted in OPERATIONS OF THE III MAF, VIETNAM, 01 March 1965 p. 5, Folder 001, USMC History Collection.

²²¹ Msg Westmoreland COMUSMACV to Sharp CinCPac, dtd 27Mar65, CMH Message Files.

²²² The establishment of the enclave at Phu Bai was the first source of friction between Marines' leadership and MACV. According to General Krulak the location was poorly suited and was a wasteful dilution of available combat assets to protect a local not directly connected to Da Nang. Its location had been chosen only because the presence of an Army radio intelligence unit there. MACV sources contend that MACV had already selected Phu Bai for further expansion in a major operational airfield. It is also interesting to note that Phu Bai was close to Hue, in turn the prize city in the I Corps area. While Westmoreland never argued this connection, it is still an interesting approach, particularly in regard of the role Phu Bai played later.

NSC meeting, President Johnson finally authorized the Marines (and Army units deployed elsewhere in South Vietnam) to engage 'in active combat under conditions to be established and approved by the Secretary of Defense in consultation with the Secretary of State.'²²³ The deployment of the reinforcing units was completed by the end of April 1965.

In little more than a month the force had doubled in size and its mission consequently expanded. On 14 April Westmoreland had sent a concept of operations of the employment of the reinforced 9th MEB. That concept was an extension of the one he had already prepared for the rest of his forces. The Marines were to operate in four escalating phases. The first phase would have seen the consolidation of their own bases; phase two, aggressive long range patrolling of possible enemy approach avenues; phase three, the execution of aggressive combat operations in conjunction with ARVN units; and, finally, in phase four, an intensified program to 'fix and destroy' the VC units operating in the Da Nang area. This part had to be conducted in cooperation with South Vietnamese forces.²²⁴ The concept of operations was in line with MACV's assumption that enemy main forces were the immediate threat requiring the 'attention' of US troops. There was no mention of a long term presence in Vietnam. MACV was still viewing the intervention as a temporary measure to counterbalance an immediate and localized threat.

In practical terms, Westmoreland's intentions proved difficult to realize. General Thi was adamantly opposed to any expansion of the defensive perimeter. Only

²²³ NSAM 328, dtd 6Apr65, NSAM collection, LBJ Presidential Library.

²²⁴ MACV, 1965, p. 40.

continuous pressure on him from both American officers and the South Vietnamese General Staff resulted in an increase of the American Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) at Da Nang.²²⁵ Operations in the Phu Bai area seemed to proceed much more rapidly due to a greater degree of cooperation between American commanders and the commander of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division, Brigadier General Chuan.²²⁶ While the limited patrols resulted in some encounters, the results were scarce. According to General Karch, 'when we had reached the limit of our Phase II TAOR we still had encountered no VC in strength other than undersized platoons.'²²⁷

Clearly the situation was not pleasing the Corps' leadership. When General Greene, the Commandant, visited Da Nang in late April his speech was interpreted as a clamouring for direct offensive action.²²⁸ Weeks later an additional brigade landed in Vietnam creating a third major USMC enclave, the airfield at Chu Lai. With 7 infantry battalions deployed, it was decided that the 9th MEB command resources were insufficient to control the entire force, and, in its place, the III MEF was created. Yet the idea of creating a Marine Expeditionary Force was judged inopportune by the State Department and the embassy. The word "Expeditionary" was deemed to be too similar to the French word 'expeditionnaire' and the old French Expeditionary Corps (actually Corps Expeditionnaire Française d'Extremé Orient, CEFEO) so the command was quickly

²²⁵ LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS, dtd 2Aug77, Vietnam Comment Files.

²²⁶ 3rd MarDiv ComC, Apr65.

²²⁷ BGen Frederick J. Karch letter to Col Clifford B. Drake, dtd 26Mar65, Drake Papers, USMC History Division.

²²⁸ Jack Shulimson, Charles Johnson, *US Marines In Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, (Washington: USMC 1978), p. 22); interview with Commandant Greene published on *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 2 May 65, p. 3.

renamed III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF). General Collins took command only to be replaced after one month's tenure by General Lewis Walt. Walt was selected for the job by Commandant Greene in person. While other candidates were available and at least one officer had expressed a strong interest for the position and had the support of General Krulak at Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPAC) headquarters at Pearl Harbor Green was immovable.

The constant reshuffling meant that the officer who had started the operation was replaced by an outsider just when the mission was being expanded thus denying the utilization of prior knowledge of the area and continuity in leadership. This was in addition to the fact that, differently from the Army, Marine involvement in Vietnam had been fairly limited.

While the bulk of MACV had extensive experience both in dealing with local situation and people the USMC lacked this. Its contributions to MACV's overall effort had been very limited, usually embedding advisors with South Vietnamese Marine units. The picture was complicated by the fact that the Marine advisors were outside the III MAF chain of command, and, usually, they were personnel not coming from units assigned to FMFPAC and those officers and NCOs were required to not communicate their missions and experience once back in the United States. While several Marine officers had visited Vietnam, most notably General Krulak, with the exception of some comments made between generals using unofficial channels, the US Marine Corps as an organization was deeply ignorant of the realities of South Vietnam.

There was not a large group of existing officers and NCOs available to provide local expertise and disseminate it at all levels of the III MAF. The majority of the advisors operating in I Corps both with the ARVN command structure and the other supporting agencies were composed of US Army personnel. These personnel were not tapped as a major source of information. Despite the fact that General Walt was indeed appointed as senior advisor to General Thi and the former senior advisor, Colonel Howard B. St. Clair, became his deputy the existing evidence describes two separate command structures rarely communicating between each other. There was also an attempt on Walt's part to replace Army personnel with Marine ones as soon as possible further reducing the amount of local knowledge available to the II MEF.

On top of that there was the already described tendency of General Walt to consider himself an independent commander outside direct MACV control. Walt was routinely using direct access to FMFPAC in Pearl Harbour and USMC HQ in Washington to bypass both General Westmoreland in Saigon and Admiral Sharp in Pearl Harbour.

The final factor in this complicated and unwieldy structure was the strained relationship with the US Army Special Forces. This relationship would deteriorate more and more in the following two years. While there is no direct evidence of an institutional opposition to the Special Forces, relations between III MAF and the USSF were strained. Using, as an example, the Special Forces camp at Khe Sanh there was a developing pattern of Special Forces warnings that went unheeded or simply discounted. Khe Sanh was a small agglomeration

of Bru Montagnards villages laying along RC 9 on the Vietnamese side of the Vietnamese-Laotian border.²²⁹ While the area had been used as a staging point for special operations and reconnaissance missions from 1962. In the late spring of 1964 a small USMC detachment arrived there to establish a listening post to conduct signal intelligence (SIGINT) operations against North Vietnamese radio traffic.²³⁰ While there had been several encounters with PAVN troops, reports of their presence and an isolated probe on the Marines' listening post in 1964, the area was considered relatively secure in 1965 at least until fall. From October onward the Special Forces started to report an increased enemy presence. The III MAF never reacted. In November the Special Forces provided evidence that the PAVN units were not merely moving south but halting in the area and preparing supply bases. In December Khe Sanh reported at least 4 enemy battalions 18 km northwest of the camp. The reports were confirmed when a PAVN regiment attacked an isolated outpost manned by Regional forces. The unit was located and subjected to intensive air strikes. Finally on 23 December guided by local reports and their own local scouts a strike force of Special Forces and local soldiers engaged PAVN soldiers in a two hour pitched battle requiring massive air support. The subsequent body count collected 32 bodies in PAVN uniform with

²²⁹ The Vietnamese terms village and hamlet can create confusion for the reader. Usually the basic settlement was called hamlet, while village was used as an administrative term. Hamlets usually consisted of a single group of a couple of dozen houses. Several hamlets were administratively clustered in a village and shared the same name often coupled with a numerical designation.

²³⁰ SIGINT is the art of eavesdropping enemy radio communications, decoding and translating them to gather intelligence on enemy forces, movements and plans. PAVN radio communications were massively developed and were benefitting from an extensive series of redundant network. While the extensiveness of the network precluded "decapitation" strikes or strategic electronic warfare against it also ensured PAVN and VC commanders were using it extensively making them prone to SIGINT. In addition the natural shape of Khe Sanh acted as a sort of amplifier allowing a listening post to monitor even distant radio networks. In 1964 a specialized USMC intelligence units with an infantry platoon was sent there; Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 19-21.

new equipment. Even if the PAVN withdrew after the engagement, two days later the Special Forces were warned by local scouts that 120mm mortars were being deployed in the area.²³¹

All these reports, and similar ones from A Shau, were ignored. Several US Army Special Forces officers accused the Marines of systematically ignoring their reports. The friction between USSF and USMC dated back to the infusion of the first Marine support units in I CTZ in 1964. According to the then commander of Khe Sanh camp, Captain Allan B. Imes, the Marines refused to support the camp activities with their helicopters especially in locating PAVN troops, and then accused the Special Forces of not providing reliable evidence of their claims.²³²

4.4 Initial operations, June-September 1965

While the III MAF was not prone to accept other service reports and estimates, its own initial operations played a much larger part in laying the foundation of further development in South Vietnam. Three major actions were often mentioned in dispatches, messages, documents and post war histories and analysis: the pacification experiment at Le My and the two conventional big unit engagements, Operations STARLITE and PIRANHA. Because of their importance in shaping both later strategy and operations it is interesting to describe them in some detail.

²³¹ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 37-38.

²³² Imes to Stubbe, personal interview quoted in Valley of Decisions (Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 18). It is also worth to note that the engagements near Khe Sanh did not appear in the 1965 volume of the USMC Official History or in the III MAF Operations Summary for 1965 or in the III MAF Command Chronology for the period.

When, finally, General Thi agreed to allow the Marines to extend their area of responsibility around Da Nang, one of the first obstacles encountered was the presence of population centres in that area. The basic assumption of the command hierarchy was that these villages were hiding or at least allowing Vietcong to operate freely. Colonel David A. Clement, the commander of 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, decided that the best way to deal with the problem was to find a way to keep a constant pressure on the Vietcong infrastructure that was believed to be existing in the villages themselves. His solution was simple, clear the village of suspected Vietcong sympathizers and then turn the villages into government strongholds rather than problems. In practical terms this required the establishment of a permanent presence in the villages. The first attempt to send a small patrol to a village called Le My was repulsed by the enemy. Clement resolved to lead a larger force to the same village to clear it once for all. His full battalion was thus involved in a complex operation that involved the majority of his battalion supported by South Vietnamese police forces to allow an accurate screening of the local residents. The Marines surrounded Le My and cleared the area encountering minimal resistance. While questioning and screening the residents, the battalion also had a medical aid post set-up to provide basic healthcare hoping to use material benefits to improve the perception of the American presence in the village. After this initial operation that resulted in several suspects apprehended, the Marines, instead of returning to their quarters at Da Nang, stayed in the village to provide local security. Slowly, in the following weeks, regional forces were inserted into the village to enhance security and train with Marine officers and NCOs while the

bulk of the Marine rifle companies took positions outside the village to expand the defensive perimeter. The operation was considered a complete success and got praise both from General Collins and Commandant Greene. Quickly, both Williams and his replacement, General Walt, declared Le My the prototype for Marine operations in Vietnam. Several years later, General Greene even maintained that, indeed, this was the blueprint for the entire campaign. It was considered a showcase both for pacification and civic action, and the amount of information volunteered from Le My residents in the following months seemed to support the contention.²³³

Yet, while Le My was indeed the textbook model, the fact was that the model was not easily reproducible everywhere in the area around Da Nang. The III MAF discovered that not every village had the same potential of Le My. In July the III MAF TAOR was extended to the south, and the unit given responsibility over the new sector. The 9th Marine Regiment planned to employ the same approach used in the Le My area north-west of Da Nang.

The final results of the operation were completely different. Not only was the expected success not achieved but one of the clearing operations resulted in a public relations disaster. While there were several villages in the new TAOR, Tactical Area Of Responsibility, the attempt to clear a village called Cam Ne just south of the Cau Do River is particularly interesting. The Cam Ne operation generated negative publicity for the Marine Corps at the time thanks to the

²³³ According to III MAF sources people from the village of Le My volunteered information on enemy location and activities on regular basis, with a peak of information provided during the month of August, the clearing of Le My happened in May. III MAF Operations, 1965, pp. 11-14.

misreporting it got in American press and the associated pictures. The action created the overused image of a Marine rifleman setting fire to a local hut with his Zippo lighter that has been often used as the archetype of the American “inability” to perform proper COIN operations.²³⁴

The concept of operations was a repetition of the Le My model on a larger scale. One reinforced Marine battalion would have cleared the area and provided continuous sweeps while local forces would have been built. On July 12th Marines from 1st and 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines tried to clear the hamlet of Duong Son 1. Two companies formed a cordon around the hamlet and one company had to clear the hamlet against strong enemy resistance in the hamlet itself.²³⁵ In the same day Company D, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion received sniper fire from the area of the Cam Ne village. Air support had to be called. At the end of the day, Duong Son 1 hamlet had been secured, but enemy fire was still received from the Cam Ne area on a daily basis for the rest of July and during early August. On August 2nd, Company D from 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment reinforced with amphibious tractors and local forces, was tasked to search Cam Ne village and clear them of Vietcong presence the following day. The operation order did not envision a long term operation. Company D was supposed to stay in the area only for one night in the village. The aim of the operation seemed to have been to enhance the security of the two companies garrisoning Duong Son 1 and try to dent the VC underground system in Cam Ne village. While at Le My

²³⁴ The official history devotes almost one full page in contesting the press allegation even going so far as accusing Morley Safer to have omitted key parts in his brief. While there is sound evidence to support Marine claims the point is that the official historians feel the need to counter the argument and to accuse the reporter of bad faith to defend the basic USMC image of a civic action oriented force. Shulimson & Johnson, ‘Landing’, p. 64.

²³⁵ Shulimson & Johnson, ‘Landing’, p. 61.

the initial clearing operation was fairly bloodless, Duong Son and Cam Ne proved that was the exception rather than the norm in the area south of Da Nang.

On August 3rd things started to go awry almost from the start. The terrain proved a considerable obstacle. Several amphibious tractors got bogged down and prevented a smooth movement to the target area. Resistance was much more intensive than expected, and the hamlets of Cam Ne 1 and 2 were extensively fortified. Several of the village dwellings were reported to be camouflaged bunkers connected by underground communication tunnels. After the operation, Company D reported 51 of those structures and 38 trenches destroyed in the course of the operation. Even if Cam Ne 1 and 2 were temporarily occupied, the approaching dusk and the volume of enemy fire persuaded the company and battalion commanders to order a withdrawal. Artillery and tank support had to be called upon to cover the withdrawal.

The situation in the area did not improve, and on August 18th two companies had to clear the village. Surprisingly, they did not meet any significant resistance in a four day clearing operation. Still, the area south of Da Nang tied three battalions down in continuous operations without any marked improvement in local security.

Le My and Cam Ne could be viewed as different sides of the pacification coin but also as two different ways for the III MAF to view local conditions. III MAF and the Marine official history stressed the point that while the residents of Le My welcomed, at least on the surface, the Marines, in the area of Cam Ne they found an hostile population. The area was reputed to be a communist

stronghold from French times, and cooperation from the residents was minimal despite civic actions and a rebuilding effort launched after the operation.²³⁶ The underlying argument of the Marine post mortem was that a striking difference existed between Le My and the villages south of the Cau Do river. While it is true that the Vietcong were operating with relative impunity in the area south of the Cau Do, the fact is that during the operation local civilians pleaded to be evacuated by the Marines.²³⁷

Furthermore III MAF summaries mentioned the fact that, after the extension of the TAOR southward and the presence of troops in the area, locals started to provide voluntary intelligence, sometimes even of significant tactical relevance. These facts seem to contradict the basic assumption of the official history and create a much more complex picture.

General Greene had called for offensive operations in May. In August his call finally seemed to be heard. Between August 17th and 19th 1965, the III MAF engaged in its first big battle, and it did it in the Marine way. After several different local intelligence sources had confirmed the presence of the 1st VC Regiment in the Van Tuong Peninsula 9 miles south of Chu Lai, an hastily assembled three battalion strong task force assaulted into the peninsula by a combination of sea and air operations. The plan was quite simple. One battalion was inserted by helicopter on the landward side of the peninsula to block enemy

²³⁶ According to the USMC official history only a single intelligence report was provided by a local Buddhist priest and pointed to a lack of support for the government cause in the area; Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 61.

²³⁷ According to the after action report of D Company the civilian pleaded the Marines to be evacuate, but lack of transport and the fact Company D was under fire prevented this course of action. 1/9 ComC, Aug 1965 p. CC-3.

escape routes while part of another reinforced the cordon after a short shore to shore movement in amphibious tractors. Finally, the main strike force consisting of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment stormed the southern seaward side of the peninsula. The operation was labelled STARLITE and was the embodiment of the manoeuvre concept the Corps had fought hard to implement in the years after the conclusion of the Korean War. From a military standpoint the operation was hugely successful. The Vietcong had entrenched themselves on the land side of the peninsula and did not expect an assault from the sea. While the air assault force encountered strong resistance, the amphibious assault was unopposed and was instrumental in the successful conclusion of the operation. III MAF command and FMFPAC were full of praise for the operations. The operation was deemed so successful that a similar effort, PIRANHA, was mounted farther south on an area centred on the Batangan peninsula.

PIRANHA was a larger effort with five battalions, three Marine, 1/7 Marines and 3/7 Marines with 3/3 Marines acting as floating reserve, and two South Vietnamese, 3rd Battalion Vietnamese Marine Corps and 2nd Battalion 4th Infantry Regiment. The operation was mounted after air reconnaissance suggested to the III MAF headquarters that extensive defensive positions were in the process of being built around 20 miles south of Chu Lai in the Batangan peninsula and its vicinity. This photographic evidence was supported by SIGINT. According to the III MAF, the area was the base of the missing battalion of the 1st VC Regiment not accounted for during operation STARLITE, the Vietcong Quan Ngai provincial

headquarter and an estimated 600-1000 Vietcong irregulars.²³⁸ The concept of operations was similar to the previous foray. 1/7 Marines assaulted from the sea, and the other three battalions formed a cordon on the landward side. Compared to STARLITE, planning was extensive with close coordination between naval and ground commanders, and briefings held at III MAF in Da Nang and MACV in Saigon. For example, the initial intelligence estimate dated August 14th, and MACV approved the operation on August 30th. The operational area was subjected to extensive reconnaissance before the “D-Day”. All this extensive planning, increased message traffic and large involvement of different personalities from different commands prompted General Krulak at FMFPAC to send a top secret communication to General Green suggesting operational security was compromised, and the enemy was likely to offer increased resistance or to withdraw from the area wasting part of the significance of the operation.²³⁹ Krulak’s concerns reflect both a weak point in American operational planning procedures and the fact that, as far he was concerned, the operation objective was, as opposed to the MACV concept, linked to the destruction of enemy forces. The operation was finally launched on September 7th. Compared to STARLITE enemy opposition was light; only one of the three landing zones was subjected to enemy action but nothing comparable in scale to the reaction on the landing zones during STARLITE. American and South Vietnamese casualties were minimal. The reduced level of contacts highlighted the two features of PIRANHA, the lack of determined enemy resistance and the

²³⁸ 1965 Operation Piranha, 06 September 1965, Folder 063, US Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, hereafter Piranha AAR.

²³⁹ Krulak to Greene, 3 September 1965, Krulak Papers, HQMC History Division.

elaborate set of measures to prevent collateral damage in populated areas. Artillery support was restricted to observed fire missions and indiscriminate destruction against hamlets was strictly forbidden. Every hamlet had a security area where artillery, naval gunfire or air support could not be used except on express authorization from higher command echelons, usually brigade or above, or in case of immediate threat.²⁴⁰ All these measures reduced collateral damage to insignificant levels, a stark contrast with the engagement at Cam Ne, yet the fact that contacts were low also contributed to reduce the need for air and artillery support in turn reducing damage.

Reported enemy casualties were low compared with the previous foray, only 178 confirmed enemy killed and a meagre 360 suspects captured. An interesting discovery by 1/7 Marines was an underground hospital in the centre of the Batangan peninsula. According to intelligence gathered from the local population, the bulk of the enemy forces had retreated from the area before the beginning of the operation.²⁴¹ The reason why the enemy withdrew before PIRANHA was launched has never been satisfactorily explained. Explanations range from the inability of American forces to actively engage the enemy when the enemy was not willing to do so, thus pointing out the unnecessary nature of larger operations, to the fact that the Allied operational security was basically compromised. One factor rarely pointed out was that, while in STARLITE the enemy had around 4 battalions in the area, in PIRANHA the enemy regular forces

²⁴⁰ BLT 1/7 Operation Order 123-65, dtd 4 Sep 65 in Piranha AAR; Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 401-405. MACV directive 525-4, 17 September 1965, History Files no. 1, William C. Westmoreland Papers, CMH.

²⁴¹ Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 88.

were estimated as a single reinforced battalion probably too weak to offer any kind of resistance. As General Krulak pointed out in his memo to Greene, operational security was lacking. In addition the amphibious nature of the operation was prone to tip the enemy on the Allied intentions. Embarking the assault battalion on ships at Chu Lai and having the ships gathering there in what was a non-routine movement was an unmistakable signal.

While the official history described the operation as hardly a success, especially considering the magnitude of the Allied efforts, the reactions at the time were different particularly because they considered PIRANHA as an extension of STARLITE.²⁴² On September 9th General Walt defined the operation a victory.²⁴³ General Krulak used the operation to justify his contention that the conventional stage of the war was done, or even more subtly, that the Vietnam War was not experiencing a conventional phase. The assumption was that the total number of casualties suffered by the 1st VC Regiment during STARLITE and PIRANHA eliminated it as a combat force in the region. Their reasoning was that the cumulative casualties suffered by the 1st VC Regiment eliminated it as a combat force and, more importantly, forced the enemy leadership to avoid major engagements. Krulak used the fact that during PIRANHA the Vietcong had avoided combat to point out that they did not want to engage in direct confrontation with American units anymore.²⁴⁴

²⁴² Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 88.

²⁴³ III MAF to CMC, 9 September 1965, General Walt statement was reported in press conference in Da Nang and directly to the press in the operation area. III MAF Message File.

²⁴⁴ Krulak to Greene, 19 September 1965, Krulak Papers, USMC History Division.

4.5 Emerging Strategic Patterns

With the conclusion of its first summer in Vietnam the III MAF moved from a simple emergency intervention to finalizing a strategic long term approach. While usually the III MAF in particular and the USMC in general were considered proponents of a pacification centric basis, the situation in 1965 was not so clear. The analysis of the previous cycle of operations yielded several conclusions that, in large part, were similar to the one reached by Westmoreland and his staff in Saigon.

First, there was the realization that Vietnam was no longer a simple phase one or two Maoist textbook insurrection. The Viet Cong already had conventional units deployed in regimental strength. Yet the struggle for controlling the population was an important part of the war as government control in several populated areas was undefined at best. There was also a dilemma in defining victory. Everyone maintained that the final victory rested on the will of the local population to support the government, but the fact was that a successful conventional invasion was both a possible threat and in part already happening. MACV identified the PAVN assaults in the II Corps central highlands during summer and fall season as a general offensive designed to topple the RVN government.

Against this confused background Marine strategy emerged as a cooperative effort between Generals Walt and Krulak and their respective staffs. The final product was summarized in October in this way:

The III MAF program is a balanced approach, exploiting the convergent virtues of large unit operations, small unit operations and pacification. It is growing steadily in intensity and scope, and has already caused the tide of battle to shift in I Corps. Our side has begun very slowly to win in this critical region.²⁴⁵

On strategic terms the III MAF envisioned adopting an oil spot approach to pacification by gradually enlarging the three controlled enclaves (Phu Bai, Da Nang and Chu Lai) until they merged into a single one, and then focus the effort northward toward Hue and Quang Tri. In operational terms the idea was to repeat the approach tested at Le My on a larger scale, securing populated areas, training local forces and then moving forward. To deal with the eventual appearance of enemy large units, battalion and regimental sized task forces would have been organized from locally available assets and deployed in large operations.²⁴⁶

Both the basic doctrinal assumption held by American armed forces, the personalities involved and the initial period of combat operations profoundly shaped this conclusion. The basic strategy was almost a carbon copy of MACV's approach. It emphasized that the war was not to be won by military force alone but by a deft combination of military and political measures, and that military operations, both large and small, were to be employed to create a safe environment where civic and economic initiatives had to be employed.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ III MAF Operations, 1965, p. 2

²⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 50

²⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 6

Yet the strategy was also deeply divergent in emphasis and scope from MACV's overall campaign plan in two main areas. The first and foremost difference was in the relative emphasis of large unit operations relative to pacification; the second was the decision on the part of III MAF to almost totally ignore the highlands and concentrate on the coastal plains.

It has already been shown how much MACV was worried by large enemy combat units and the threat they constituted. III MAF analysis instead considered this threat a secondary one, while the primary threat was constituted by local forces mixing with the population.²⁴⁸ In the past this conclusion has been used to justify the conclusion that there were two different doctrines in operation in Vietnam. In addition the argument has been used to support the image of a population-centric Marine approach compared to a more conventional Army one. The problem in this interpretation is that the differences in strategy were not the product of a difference in doctrine but more of a difference in perception of the situation. According to both Generals Krulak and Walt the enemy conventional force had been destroyed in the I CTZ during the summer battles. The shift in emphasis to pacification was then quite logical.

STARLITE and PIRANHA were the most important factors in the assumption underlying III MAF strategy. On one side they were used to establish the fact that American forces would have prevailed in any engagement against VC units due to their superior firepower, training, discipline and combined arms approach. On the other side they were used to justify the contention that enemy

²⁴⁸ Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 116, Krulak to McNamara, 11 Nov 1965, Krulak Papers.

conventional forces in the I Corps had been destroyed, and it was now safe and productive to implement a strong pacification effort. There was also the underlying assumption that, once militarily destroyed, main force units would have merged back into the local networks instead of withdrawing to remote base areas. Thus the shift to pacification was also a logical extension of the campaign to destroy enemy main force units.

Supporting this approach was the different emphasis on enemy base areas. As has been already indicated MACV was concerned with the presence of these base areas in remote regions and the fact that enemy units were able to just withdraw to these areas to recuperate, re-equip and replace losses before again threatening populated areas. MACV's plan had considered these areas a priority target and emphasized the need to hit them at the earliest opportunity. III MAF was simply ignoring them. As it has been pointed out for Lewis Walt the defence of the coastal plain had to rest on the plain itself not on the sparsely populated highlands.²⁴⁹

The two main priorities of the III MAF strategy were the expansion of the percentage of local population under government control and the provision of security for said population.

These two priorities in turn required that the III MAF effort had to be directed to the populated coastal lowlands. The population was living there, and the enemy local infrastructure was, it was assumed, also concentrated there. Because there were no significant population concentrations outside the coastal area, the

²⁴⁹ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 46.

highlands were devoid of any interest. Here is where the dual geography of the area played an important role. Once it was determined that the enemy manoeuvre units had been removed from the equation and they had melted into the populated areas, the importance of controlling the highland areas to deny the enemy safe areas and infiltration routes was greatly reduced.

While the plan was logical and, once the basic assumption of destruction of the enemy main force and lack of escalation on the part of Hanoi were accepted, sound, it failed to take into consideration several intelligence indicators and developments that the III MAF headquarters was receiving in the last months of 1965. Even discounting the warning coming from the border camps, some troubling events happened near the coastal plains in December.

On November 17th a regional force post in a village called Hiep Duc was attacked by a force later identified as the 1st Viet Cong Regiment (the same unit reportedly annihilated during STARLITE) and overrun. Hiep Duc was the district capital of a farming area called Que Son Valley or Nui Loc Son Basin. The valley rested between the two Marine enclaves of Da Nang and Chu Lay astride the main Highway 1. It was considered vital and friendly to the government.²⁵⁰ A two battalion strong ARVN reaction force, with one Marine battalion in support, was air assaulted into the area and had an initial engagement with enemy forces

²⁵⁰ The III MAF Operation summary labelled the area as a major VC base camp; III MAF Operations, December Supplement, 1965, p. 8, Folder 001, USMC History Collection. The official history points out the presence of regional forces until November and the fact that there was a basic government infrastructure operating; Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 98. The official After Action Report clearly stated that the Que Son valley was a government held area; AFTER ACTION REPORT OPERATION HARVEST MOON, 08 December 1965, pp. 3-4 Folder 062, USMC History Collection; hereafter Harvest Moon AAR. The amount of material captured during the operation supports the contention that at least part of the area was indeed used as a staging and resupply area.

in the period between November 18 and November 22. Another enemy offensive against Thach Tru, another district capital 16 miles south of Quang Ngai city forced the ARVN I Corps commander to shift the units. After the attack on Thach Tru was repulsed, General Walt prodded both by Generals Krulak and Westmoreland, again planned a joint operation with General Thi in the Que Son valley. Three Marine battalions supported by a composite artillery battalion, two ARVN infantry battalions and one Ranger battalion were deployed for the operation, codenamed HARVEST MOON. Tactical control would be exercised by a provisional command labelled Task Force Delta. The concept was to use the three South Vietnamese battalions to push overland from the coast to the valley while two Marine battalions were inserted by air on the flanks and rear of the enemy forces to complete a textbook cordon scheme.²⁵¹ The operation was scheduled to begin on December 9th.

The operation opened on December 8th with the road advance of the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion and the 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment. The ARVN column was rapidly engaged by enemy ground forces estimated as at least two battalions during December 8th and 9th.²⁵² On the first day, the bulk of the enemy effort was directed against the Rangers, while, on the second day, the 1/5th Infantry was targeted. Marine close air support, artillery and the insertion of the

²⁵¹ III MAF Operations, December Supplement, 1965, p. 8; Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 103.

²⁵² Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', pp. 103-105. According to the report on the action included in the Operation of III MAF the enemy action happened only on 8 December, the damage to the ARVN units was not heavy and the insertion of USMC units developed according to the operational concept. Yet the 1/5th ARVN battalion is reported to have been rendered combat ineffective on the 8th. III MAF Operations, December Supplement, 1965, p. 11. The official history and, more importantly, the After Action Report depict a much more confusing situation in the first two days. The After Action report, while not giving details on the attack against the 1/5th motivated the deployment of 2/7th Marines as to reduce pressure on the 1/5th ARVN; Harvest Moon AAR.

third ARVN battalion, 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment, to support the Rangers prevented a complete debacle, but the fact was that the enemy was operating in battalion and regimental size with impunity. On the second day, 2/7th Marines was air assaulted in support of 1/5th ARVN followed by the 3/3rd Marines. The latter battalion ran into a prepared VC position at 1700 and was pinned in an hour long fire-fight. Several engagements occurred the following day. Then the involved units reported only light contacts until December 12 where, again, the 3/3rd Marines was involved in a reported heavy engagement. The enemy seems to have melted away after that until December 18th. During this initial phase, several B-52 tactical strikes were made against identified and suspected troop concentrations. While the direct effects of those strikes were not assessed, the area where they were made did not generate subsequent contacts.

On December 18th, the 2/7th Marines was ambushed while in column of march near the village of Ky Phu. A full VC battalion, identified as the 80th Battalion of the 1st VC regiment, attacked the column on the flank. The following fire-fight lasted approximately three hours and the total casualties were 11 killed and 76 wounded. Considering the battalion had already suffered casualties in the previous days and, in the late afternoon of December 18th, had to evacuate 54 medical casualties, the losses sustained were indeed noticeable. Enemy losses were estimated at above one hundred dead and more wounded. The operation terminated officially on December 20th with all USMC and ARVN units returning to their bases.

III MAF and MACV considered the operation as a success and, by standard effectiveness measures, undoubtedly the operation was a success. The combined task force operated in the area for almost two weeks engaging and severely mauling a reinforced enemy regiment, destroying several caches of enemy supplies and probably thwarting an enemy attack toward Tam Ky. Yet the operation was also interesting for a number of other factors.

First, it dispelled the idea that the 1st VC Regiment had been eliminated. From captured documents, prisoner interrogation and information gathered by the four deserters captured, the 1st VC regiment was indeed back at full strength and had also been reinforced by additional units including a full heavy weapon PAVN battalion.²⁵³ The enemy operated in an aggressive manner, and, in every battalion sized engagement, they not only used small arms but support weapons. The mention of recoilless rifle and mortar fire was a fixture of these actions. Certainly the enemy did not seem afraid to engage the Marines.

Prisoners and deserters also reported the infiltration in the southern part of the I CTZ of at least one PAVN regiment, the 36th Infantry Regiment. The information was not considered reliable and was discounted. While Task Force Delta and III MAF did not accept the information as it was based on hearsay, the information was again in line with the data Khe Sanh camp was providing in the same month. Three days after HARVEST MOON ended, the Special Forces at Khe Sanh engaged

²⁵³ The battalion was identified as the 519th [aka 195th] Antiaircraft Battalion, identification was done by a combination of human intelligence, captured equipment and translation of captured documents, Harvest Moon AAR, enclosure 2, 2-3.

regular PAVN troops in the area. Indeed the report of the presence of the 36th Regiment could have been at least compared with other data.

The enemy action in the Que Son valley also emphasized the fact that, due to the lack of ARVN forces and the commitment of USMC forces to local pacification, both the I Corps and the III MAF had no reserve units to meet contingencies. Units had to be pulled out of other areas and duties to respond to the threat. The double enemy attack at Hiep Duc and Thach Tru forced general Thi to decide to hold only one. While the concentration of more than 7 battalions for HARVEST MOON was impressive, all units had to be pulled out from other duties. The III MAF concept of local pacification had been proven to be vulnerable to enemy action.

The last factor emerging from HARVEST MOON was the relationship with population centres and enemy base areas. While III MAF maintained that the enemy was taking his supplies and support from supporting villages, the location of supply and weapon's stores uncovered in the operation seemed to support MACV's contention that the enemy was using remote areas as base camps. The caches tended to be concentrated in the sparsely populated area on the western side of the operational zone. All the caches were discovered in areas hit by B-52 strikes and without villages.²⁵⁴ Also, the majority of supplies seemed to be of external origin including cloth recovered in a uniform factory. Indeed it seemed that enemy main forces were not using local sources for sustaining themselves but were relying on infiltration.

²⁵⁴ B-52 Strikes had almost never been utilized against areas with civilian population.

While all this information was duly noted in the After Action Report disseminated to III MAF, FMFPAC and sent to the USMC Headquarters in Washington, the summary of the operation presented by the III MAF to MACV portrays a much rosier picture. It failed to mention the presence of PAVN units except in mentioning two prisoners and two deserters, and, while the maps included reported the heavy engagements in the first day of the operation, the narrative downplayed these overplaying, instead, the effectiveness of USMC air strikes. While the report on enemy casualties and captured materials coincide with the one in Task Force Delta, the report of the origin of the material is not specified.²⁵⁵

4.6 Conclusions

Far from being the coherent effort in counterinsurgency that some contemporary publications present, the Marines' approach to their own area of responsibility shows several different interplaying factors, often in a non-coordinated manner. General Greene asserted that pacification and counterinsurgency were on his mind even before the landing at Da Nang; the documentary evidence does not support this contention. He is said to also have

²⁵⁵ There is a striking similarity, often with the use of identical paragraph between the discussion of USMC operations in the MACV command summaries and the Operations of the III MAF summaries. III MAF summaries had a wider circulation than the unit reports thus it is conceivable that the former were used as a base to write the narrative of USMC operations in the MACV documentation. Considering that MACV was not privy to the Task Force Delta after action report is thus not too farfetched to assume that the III MAF communications to MACV were indeed tailored to support III MAF opinions.

expressed this view to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.²⁵⁶ On May 2nd 1965 he told several reporters, “You don’t defend a place by sitting on your dirty box.” This is clearly a call for offensive operations.²⁵⁷ The 1965 statement did not reconcile itself to the ideas expressed several years later to Marine historians. The same eagerness for offensive operations was present in other officers. They chafed under MACV restrictions and pressed Saigon to ease them. In the first stage of the intervention, the majority of the officers did not seem interested in the gradual oil spot concept theoretically expressed by David Galula’s, the French counterinsurgency theorist, writings and championed in the documents prepared in late 1965 by the III MAF arguing for a pacification strategy.²⁵⁸

Furthermore the comments of both General Collins and General Krulak on the Le My experiment are revealing. Both officers, while wholeheartedly endorsing the experiment, indicated that Le My was a local enterprise and not a part of a greater scheme unique to the Corps. Indeed, as Colonel John E. Greenwood, a staff officer in the III MAF, remarked, the majority of the expertise in COIN was not based on pre-World War Two experiences but on contemporary experiences mainly from the US Army campaigns in Korea, Greece and the Philippines and the British experience in Malaya. Guerrilla warfare expertise was one of the

²⁵⁶ Greene comment to USMC Official History manuscript, quoted in Shulimson & Johnson, ‘Landing’, p. 47.

²⁵⁷ General Greene was quoted by both Washington Post and the Times Herald on that date. Shulimson & Johnson, ‘Landing’, p. 29,

²⁵⁸ David Galula (1911-1967) was a French Army officer with combat experience in Algeria (1956-1958). He lectured both in France and the US on counterinsurgency subjects and after retiring from the French Army in 1962 he started an academic career in the United States. Today is widely considered one of the ‘fathers’ of modern COIN.

popular topics of the period, and hundreds of Marine officers, including Greenwood himself, studied it not at Quantico but in Army schools.²⁵⁹

What is even more interesting is how the USMC commanders interpreted the operation and decided to create a pattern from it. Colonel Clement had to use a full battalion to take possession of the village of Le My, and the battalion had to stay in the area to provide protection and security. Also, from the evidence collected there is no proof that VC main force or even PAVN regulars were operating in the area in question.²⁶⁰ Overwhelming force had been brought to bear and had to stay. And despite the presence of Marines and local Marine-trained security forces, the enemy always had the capability to terrorize the population; in December a deputy district chief was tortured and assassinated in the area.²⁶¹ Clearly while both III MAF and FMFPAC leadership was ready to seize the benefits of the operation, they did not weigh the cost or potential shortcomings of such operations.²⁶²

Operation STARLITE and its aftermath and impact on III MAF planning are even more revealing. After STARLITE, III MAF launched several similar operations with the aim of engaging and destroying main force concentrations through a combination of amphibious and air assaults. While the results were less than spectacular they did not deter regimental officers from continuing to propose

²⁵⁹ Col John E. Greenwood quoted in Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 133.

²⁶⁰ The same consideration is expressed by the USMC Official history highlighting the fact that Le My could have indeed been considered a village at least showing basic support for the government side; Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 61.

²⁶¹ 1/3 ComC, Dec65, the same incident is mentioned also in Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 146 with added comment from Colonel Clement on the lack of total security.

²⁶² When presented with a situation similar to Le My in two neighbouring hamlets Colonel Clement (the same officer who led the Le My 'experiment' pressured the villagers to relocate because he was not willing to overstretch his perimeter Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', pp. 47-48.

them. STARLITE did not appear to be the exception but more the rule of early USMC operations in Vietnam.

Two main points emerge in comparing the reactions both at MACV in Saigon and III MAF at Da Nang to these operations. MACV and Westmoreland were much less sanguine than the III MAF in evaluating the long term results. While they considered STARLITE and the follow up operations clear military successes, they placed them in the context of a prolonged struggle. MACV's position was clear on that regard; they were just part of a larger campaign. Furthermore MACV clearly considered enemy activity likely to escalate.²⁶³

The USMC position was much more ambiguous. On one side there is the official history approach, written several years later, supporting MACV's claim and highlighting the fact that USMC leadership underestimated the ability of major VC formations to rebuild themselves. In addition, major operations to deal with those units had to be a constant part of the campaign.²⁶⁴ On the other side there are contemporary documents that claim a decisive success.

Even more interesting is the difference in the contextualization of STARLITE and the other "big units" operations between the two services. For MACV, big unit sweeps were just a part of the overall effort, and they had to be continued almost indefinitely to keep the enemy off balance and deny him the chance to disrupt RVN pacification efforts. The III MAF used the operations to justify its contention that the main force war was already won. Walt and Krulak used the successes of STARLITE and PIRANHA to justify a shift from large combat

²⁶³ MACV, 1965, p. 165

²⁶⁴ Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 83

operations to pacification. In a message dated September 18th 1965 and sent to General Greene, General Krulak flatly stated that his and General Thi's opinion was that the combination STARLITE-PIRANHA defeated VC conventional forces.²⁶⁵ The same view is echoed by the famous statement by General Walt that 'he was able to deal with anything the enemy would have thrown at him without problems'.²⁶⁶ Of course the III MAF maintained that they were able to deal with any contingency using available units, but this was at the cost of having to interrupt pacification operations to deal with contingency.²⁶⁷ The events of December 1965 that led to Operation HARVEST MOON and the operation itself proved that Krulak's and Thi's overly optimistic picture was just that.²⁶⁸ VC main forces were still dangerous and still willing to confront US and RVN forces in large battles.

Moving from the main force threat to the realm of pacification, the picture is no less controversial. Marines engaged in civic actions, but their efforts were limited, uncoordinated and certainly smaller than Army programs. As a matter of fact the entire III MAF civic action effort was smaller than the similar program started by the 173rd Airborne Brigade alone.²⁶⁹ While Le My was broadly touted as a role

²⁶⁵ Krulak to McNamara and Greene, Krulak Papers.

²⁶⁶ Letter Walt to Buse, 29 Dec 1966, appended to III MAF OPLAN 121-66 PRACTICE NINE, USMC History Division.

²⁶⁷ III MAF Operations, 1965.

²⁶⁸ In few months General Thi's view of American progress changed much. In April he stated to General Krulak that the Marines were not ready to operate in VC held areas, in September he was declaring the VC main force spent; Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', pp. 27-28.

²⁶⁹ The 173rd Brigade established a brigade level civic action effort immediately after having being deployed to Vietnam. According to the brigade records in the first seven months of operation the program administered medical care to 51,400 people, built 14 Schools, a laundry, 3 public latrines, 5 wells, 2 playgrounds for children, one church, one refugee settlement, 29 bridges 2 hospitals (for a total of 57 different projects) and repaired 43 kilometres of roads. III MAF wide civic action results were less impressive. According to III MAF own statistics in the three enclaves 48,723 Vietnamese received medical care and 63 construction projects were initiated.

model, it was also an isolated case and not a part of a pre-ordained strategic focus. Despite the claims that the Corps was at the forefront of counterinsurgency, it seems that Le My was the result of local improvisation. It is interesting that the commander of the III MAF, at the time General Collins, was not the instigator of the operation but a simple, albeit very pleased, spectator. The main limiting factors of the civic action program were lack of resources and lack of general direction of the effort. The majority of initiatives were often locally funded and organized. While the official history spends a great deal of space describing the single initiatives, the reality was that these initiatives were just that, local initiatives of motivated officers and Marines. There was nothing on the scale of the US Army medical care program established by MACV. The first dispensary established in Da Nang for the civilian population was run by a local nurse and supplied using civilian donations. The Marines were just re-distributing the supplies rather than leading a medical care program in the area. In the same September message used to tout the destruction of VC main forces, General Krulak praised the massive effort in civic action made by the Marines. Furthermore, the official report of operations for the period March-September 1965 states that: 'finally and largely on its own, III MAF has entered the pacification program.'²⁷⁰

The Combined Action program experienced a similar situation. Again the program started developing from local circumstances, the decision of the 1st RVN

Considering the III MAF expanded to 12 Marine infantry battalions and several logistic units in the period and the 173rd Airborne Brigade had only 3 parachute infantry battalions the numbers do not support the usual contention the USMC were mainly in pacification business and the Army was not.

²⁷⁰ III MAF Operations, 1965, p. 1.

Infantry Division commander to place local forces under USMC operational control, rather than being envisioned from higher level. Even III MAF command insisted that the idea originated locally and the only contribution of the III MAF was approving it.²⁷¹ A successful limited field experiment was then expanded to a MAF-wide program. While there are resemblances to the measures included in the old Small Wars Manual, there are also resemblances to the prescriptions of US Army COIN doctrine. Even the Marines own official history pins down the source of this experiment on the British experience with joint companies in Malaya, rather than the “banana wars” as the inspiration for the program.²⁷²

What is striking is how these different and unconnected elements were merged into a single strategy plan developed in alternative and denial of the overall concept created by MACV. Several reasons and factors can be used to explain that.

As has been already pointed out several times Lewis Walt had served in China and was a protégé of the old “Caribbean” heroes. While there is no definite documentary evidence, it is reasonable to assume that Walt’s previous experiences played a role in shaping his views of the situation. General Walt himself claimed that in his memoirs. According to him all his experience on insurgency had been drawn from direct contact with icons of the Marine Corps’ earlier experiences.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Shulimson & Johnson, ‘Landing’, pp. 133-134.

²⁷² Ibid, pp. 133-134.

²⁷³ Shulimson & Johnson, ‘Landing’, p. 133; Walt, ‘Strange War’ p. 29.

Previous historical experience can explain the high level approach but not the bottom level initiatives. The lower level initiatives were just an implementation of doctrinal prescriptions derived from the common COIN doctrine. Colonels, Majors and Captains had not been schooled in counterinsurgency by USMC lore but by US Army schools and doctrines. The majority of Marine Colonels, Lieutenant Colonels and Majors had attended US Army schools and subscribed to Army thinking. Le My, limited civic action programs and the creation of the embryonic CAP in the area around Phu Bai could have been lifted directly from US Army manuals.

While the methods were similar, it was the final balance that was different. While the push for pacification had been ascribed to USMC strategic culture or specific personalities, there were some much more influential factors. One was the presence of an undeniably large amount of institutional arrogance in the concept of operations developed by the III MAF in 1965. Marines' initial successes were overstated while RVN failure downplayed and attributed to RVN problems rather than enemy actions.

A second factor was the approach to the problem of base areas. The Marine high level leadership tended to downplay the importance of base areas, and they linked enemy strength to local population concentration instead of infiltration and outright external invasion. In the same vein the continuous stream of reports coming from the border camps about increased infiltration of regular units from North Vietnam was also ignored.

The presence of combat forces appeared to be the key factor in determining the allegiance of a certain area. In Le My's case, the Marine civic and security effort built up on a previous "friendly" situation without being hampered by direct enemy activity. At Duong Son and Cam Ne the effort floundered because the Vietcong opposed it with determined action. What Cam Ne demonstrated was a basic fact that seemed to escape both Walt and Krulak. The enemy was able to determine the intensity of combat. Despite Krulak's contention that heavy firepower was not suitable to populated area, the fact was that he did not address how to react when the enemy was indeed forcing the use of superior firepower in populated area. MACV's approach was to block the enemy main force formations from entering the populated area, but following MACV's lead would have meant the need to create a sizeable reaction force or to not involve Marine battalions in direct pacification.

III MAF's answer to the conundrum assumed that by the end of the summer the enemy main body had indeed been defeated and that the chances of this main body being rebuilt were slim if not non-existent. This consideration allowed them to simply sidestep the issue of confronting enemy main force. If General Thi and General Krulak were correct, situations like Cam Ne would never have been repeated. Yet HARVEST MOON provided evidence that the assumption was premature.

In addition while the concept allowed for some flexibility in responding to sudden contingencies, the fact that reserve forces were to be created from units already employed in other missions left the overall concept at the mercy of

enemy will.²⁷⁴ If something was lacking from the III MAF approach it was the ability to interfere with enemy operations and force the enemy to react. For all its offensive spirit and ethos and for all the optimistic and aggressive messages by Krulak, the strategy was strictly defensive.

On a broader level the Achilles' heel of III MAF's concept of operation was that it was Walt's and Krulak's brainchild. They developed it almost independently from MACV and any other agency in Vietnam. The USMC approach to strategy was resting more in the hands of the local commander than an institutionalized debate. This in turn meant that strength, intuition, assumptions, flaws and biases of the local commander played a crucial role in shaping not only operations but, as Vietnam shows, also local strategy.

Furthermore the institutional bias against other services, and in particular against Army Special Forces that were manning the border camps, was hampering cooperation and proper exchange of information. In this regard it is interesting to note that Lewis Walt had worked closely with Admiral Arleigh Burke when the latter was Chief of Naval Operations.²⁷⁵ He witnessed the heated debates between the services during the Eisenhower administration and

²⁷⁴ MACV directed the III MAF to create a permanent 3 battalions strong reserve for contingency operations, yet the order went unheeded and due to the particular command arrangement and the reluctance of Westmoreland to force a direct inter-service confrontation the issue was not pressed. Cosmas, 'Escalation', pp. 332-333; Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', p. 116.

²⁷⁵ Arleigh Albert Burke (1901-1999) was the Chief of Naval Operations from 1955 to 1961. He had both a distinguished combat career in world War Two and Korea as surface commander and a long association with staff positions after the war. He was instrumental in the navy effort to defame the Air Force and the Secretary of Defense during the so-called "Revolts of the Admirals". He also upheld the US Navy case during the Eisenhower administration reforms and cuts. There is evidence that Burke worked closely with Walt when the latter was Assistant Director of Personnel see the personal confidential letter from Burke to Walt, 14 May 1958, Folder 11, Box 09, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: General Subject Files, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

especially the Air Force attempt to swallow every service into a single one. That made him sensitive on the command and control issue and on USMC survival. This attitude can even be another of the reasons behind his personal selection by General Greene as commander of the III MAF in spite of other available candidates.

The logical consequence of all these factors was that Walt saw III MAF as fighting a parallel war to MACV. The war in the I CTZ had to be won, but the victory had to be a Marine one. Considering the pressure the Corps faced in the years between Korea and Vietnam, it can be said that the main issue for several key elements in the USMC chain of command was how to best use Vietnam to prove the utility and superiority of the Corps. An interesting case is the employment of amphibious movements in almost all operations in 1965. Shore to shore or ship to shore assaults were made in STARLITE, PIRANHA, HARVEST MOON and several smaller operations. In addition the 7th Fleet Special Landing Force was used in a series of coastal raids called Operation DAGGER THRUST. Now while the use of amphibious movement was indeed providing several tactical advantages, the fact that often units had to be embarked on the ships of a landing group and then moved to the operational area, a process requiring several days, meant that these movements often tipped the enemy off to the nature of the operation. Yet in the first two years of operations amphibious assaults were used quite liberally even overriding tactical and operational considerations. Marine operations had to uphold traditional Marine concepts.

Chapter 5: Securing the I CTZ, 1966-1967

5.1 Introduction

Using a metaphor it could be said that between 1966 and 1970 US and, to a lesser extent, Allied forces in Vietnam started to conduct 'business as usual'. Due to the peculiar nature of the war with a lack of fixed frontlines, undefined borders between combat and rear area zones, the mix of conventional and guerrilla war, and a very low force to space ratio, operations did not clearly fit into the neat models created by planners and historians alike. Reflecting these disparate and unconventional elements the nature of Allied command was also special. More than other wars in American history, Vietnam has been associated with iconic figures like Generals Westmoreland and Abrams for the US Army and Generals Walt and Krulak for the Marines. While the role of these figures has been exaggerated out of proportion by some authors, it is undeniable that they played a definite role in the period. As previously discussed, Westmoreland and Abrams have been respectively used as scapegoat and champion by some historians, while Krulak and Walt have assumed almost hero status in the Marine Corps.

Behind this simple façade rests a world where deeper factors such as doctrine, enemy actions, terrain, force structure and strategic priorities dictated strategies and tactics and shaped outcomes. The aim of this chapter is thus to explore the basic trends of US military operations in Quang Tri and Thua Thien and their effects on the prosecution of the war. It will not be a chronological discussion or

a detailed operational history, but instead it will focus on the key factors that shaped the 'American phase' of the Vietnam War in the northern reaches of the I CTZ. It will focus on broader perspectives such as the importance of pacification, the relative independence of the III MAF, the problems posed by having to control Vietnam's border and the alleged climactic change instigated by General Abrams in American strategy.

5.2 Continuing Trends and Problems

The III MAF and General Walt did not change their own concept of operations when they formalized it in an Operational Plan in 1966. At the conclusion of the first year of US intervention in Vietnam, General Walt's focus was still the populated lowlands. PAVN units would have been engaged, but only on Walt's terms, namely when they ventured out of their sanctuaries both in the I CTZ and Laos. There was nothing different from the strategy formulated the previous year. It was clear that both III MAF and FMFPAC regarded the threat of enemy main forces as declining.²⁷⁶ Marine officers were pleased with the combined results of STARLITE and PIRANHA, and both operations still figured in planning documents as a justification to shift the focus from large scale actions to saturation patrolling, pacification, and civic action.²⁷⁷ Both Walt in Da Nang and Krulak in Honolulu were stressing the importance of VC local forces and village cadre and limiting the importance of PAVN and VC main forces.²⁷⁸ To support

²⁷⁶ Headquarters United States Marine Corps, Force Requirements and Long Range Estimates for I Corps Republic of Vietnam, 1966, p. 12 Vietnam Center and Archive, USMC collection, Hereafter 'HQUSMC Force Requirements'.

²⁷⁷ 'HQUSMC Force Requirements'.

²⁷⁸ Krulak to McNamara; FMFPAC, *A Strategic Appraisal Vietnam*, Vietnam Center and Archive, USMC Collection.

this goal, the campaign plan emphasized expansion of the Combined Action Program and of populated areas under direct Marine control.

While later commentators have used the III MAF insistence on population security as a sign of the better ability of the Marines' command chain to understand COIN as compared to MACV, several elements did not fit neatly into this interpretation. Marine strategy was not different in scope from the overall campaign plan formulated by MACV; it differed only in timing. As previously discussed, MACV continually argued that the people were the critical element in the conflict in Vietnam. Providing security to the civilian population and rooting the guerrillas from the villages were indeed the final goals.²⁷⁹ In such light III MAF and MACV differences were more of style rather than substance as it has been argued. Yet Westmoreland and his staff in Saigon were not persuaded that the Autumn 1965 offensive had been the last shot of the PAVN before reverting to a guerrilla campaign as the III MAF was arguing.²⁸⁰ Intelligence data were indeed supporting MACV fears.²⁸¹ If MACV was braced for more high intensity confrontations in II and III CTZ, the III MAF was, as already discussed, overestimating the successes of STARLITE and PIRANHA while downplaying the ominous signals coming from Operation HARVEST MOON. The unspoken truth

²⁷⁹ Jack Shumlinson, *US Marines in Vietnam 1966: An Expanding War*, (Washington: HQUSMC 1982), p. 11; Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15 May 78, Vietnam Comment Files; LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 78], Vietnam Comment Files: FMFPAC, 'Strategic Appraisal', pp. 13-14.

²⁸⁰ 'HQUSMC Force Requirements' p. 12.

²⁸¹ MACV, 1966

about the III MAF in Vietnam was that the Marines, at their highest levels of command, regarded the PAVN as an inferior adversary.²⁸²

While perfectly reasonable on the surface. Walt's approach had already sown the seeds of failure. Several elements were not fully addressed in the III MAF estimates or concept of operations. There was never a real discussion of the resources necessary for the implementation of the CAP concept on a larger scale and how these requirements would have weighed against overall troop ceilings, logistic constraints, and contingency operations. Furthermore III MAF emphasis on pacification could be deemed tactical rather than strategic. As previously discussed in chapter 4, MACV was keenly aware that US direct intervention in Vietnam did indeed possess limits in duration. While time limits had not been set, the feeling at MACV was that some sort of success had to be achieved before 1970.²⁸³ American forces had thus been employed in tasks that could improve the RVN situation in the short term. While commendable, Marine pacification efforts did not set any kind of time goals. There was a somewhat unspoken assumption that the III MAF would have been in the country as long as necessary to complete its own campaign plan. The long term implications of a possible American withdrawal on the CAP were never analysed.

III MAF efforts also continued to show a disturbing degree of independence from other agencies and a lack of coordination. To avoid an inter-service battle,

²⁸² Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 49; letter, Walt to Buse 29 December 1966, (serial 0002000966) appended to III MAF OPLAN 121-66, Walt Papers, USMC History Division; CGFMFPac, "Pacific Operations," Tab F, HQMC, General Officers Symposium Book, 1967, pp . F6-F7, HQMC History Division; Westmoreland, 'Soldier's Reports', p. 198

²⁸³ Hennessy, 'Strategy', p. 76

MACV crafted the III MAF mission in the broadest possible way reducing the amount of control it had on the Marines. The MACV directive stated:

Conduct military operations in I ARVN Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) in support of and in coordination with CG, I ARVN Corps, and in other areas of RVN [Republic of Vietnam] to defeat the VC and extend GVN [Government of South Vietnam] control over all of Vietnam .²⁸⁴

The letter of instruction was built over the Campaign Plan already disseminated by MACV, but it also demonstrated Westmoreland's sensibilities to inter-service rivalry and the muddled chain of command existing in the I CTZ. General Walt's staff did indeed created a balanced, integrated approach in the 1966 campaign plan, but even this was not sufficient to end the debate about strategy and priorities. The main weakness of the campaign was the tying up of the entire III MAF to area security and a lack of provision for mobile reserves to counter threats to pacification. Besides running contrary to Westmoreland's guidance, it also defied all accepted COIN dictums that emphasized the offensive role of elite formations, instead tying down the 3rd Marine Division to security roles. Of a total of 21 combat battalions, only 11 were supposed to be available for mobile operations. The III MAF concept of operations was also based on a steady influx of Allied troops in the I CTZ and, more importantly, on a lack of reaction from Hanoi without increases in monthly infiltration and no major troop deployment except in the southern areas of the I CTZ.²⁸⁵ Essentially, Walt decided that the enemy would not have escalated the war in his TAOR. With such assumptions,

²⁸⁴ MACV Letter of Instruction, Westmoreland to Walt, dated 21 Nov 1965

²⁸⁵ Hq III MAF, G-3 Section, "Presentation for LtGen Krulak," dtd 1Feb66, encl 18, III MAF ComC, Feb 66.

Walt hoped to have a firm control on the coastal area from Quang Tri to Quang Nam and be able to make inroads on the river valleys toward the interior by the end of 1966. This estimate represented a modification of the one presented to General Krulak in October when the goal was scheduled for mid-1966.²⁸⁶ The same estimate did not even consider the dangers resulting from the recent loss of the A Shau Valley in January 1966.

Adding oil to the fire, General Krulak decried the balanced approach as a compromise with Westmoreland and maintained that 'every man we put into hunting for the NVA was wasted.'²⁸⁷ Krulak continued to oppose Westmoreland's ideas with Admiral Sharp at CINCPAC while the Commandant, General Greene, did the same at the JCS in Washington, or, at least, they claimed to have taken such actions.²⁸⁸ While this continued undermining of MACV command authority had been used to buttress the case for a COIN minded Marine Corps, it amounted more to inter-service squabbling and strategic debate. Far from being COIN visionaries, the leaders of the Marine Corps showed a complete lack of understanding of Vietnam. Despite ample data to

²⁸⁶ Hq III MAF, G-3 Section, "Presentation for LtGen Krulak," dtd 1Feb66, encl 18, III MAF ComC, Feb 66,

²⁸⁷ LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS,n .d . [May 1978] (Vietnam Comment File).

²⁸⁸ Krulak Comments; Shumlinson, 'Expanding War', p. 14; Greene also claimed to have presented his views to the JCS in Washington and while the JCS were supportive Westmoreland was not; Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 5 May 78 (Vietnam Comment File). Greene's view is not supported by Cosmas or by other historians. Cosmas points out that Westmoreland concept of operations 'had the concurrence of Admiral Sharp and the Joint Chiefs and incorporated much of their thinking' it is worth to note that Green was a member of the Joint Chiefs at the time. Cosmas, 'Escalation', p. 250. Furthermore, Admiral Sharp fully supported MACV concept . Ulysses S. Sharp U. S., *Strategy For Defeat: Viatnam in Retrospect*, (Da Capo: Presidio 1978), p. 92. In addition even civilian advisors concurred with the MACV plan: 'General Westmoreland and his people inevitably think first of military programs, though they have been imaginative and understanding about the importance of other aspects.' George McBundy to Lyndon B. Johnson, 7 Feb 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968, Volume II, Vietnam January-June 1965*. While the opposition of General Krulak is well documented, General Greene did not emerge as forceful and effective as he told the Marine historians in 1978. Evidence makes his comment about the Joint Chiefs of Staff difficult to accept.

support Westmoreland's analysis that the PAVN was indeed a primary threat, the Marines refused to see the nexus between regular and local forces. While programs like the Combined Action Program and saturation patrolling were indeed textbook solution to counteract local guerrillas, they did not provide a solution to the conventional threat nor were they addressing the interdependence between the two facets of the war in Vietnam.

Furthermore, despite all the emphasis on pacification and population control between 1966 and the end of 1967, the situation in the I CTZ, especially in its two northern provinces, did not improve considerably, or at least it did not improve in proportion to the efforts put by the III MAF and the claims of success of the population centric strategy found in later writers. Despite all the claims to the contrary, CAP was a failure in providing security on its own. This lack of measurable success had two main reasons, and both reflected negatively on the III MAF leadership.

The first major setback for the pacification effort was the so called 'Buddhist Revolt' that swept Hue and Da Nang in 1966. It started in March 1966 when the Buddhist commander of the I CTZ, General Thi, was fired by the Saigon government. While the move was mainly based on Thi's penchant for being involved in coups and his lacklustre performance as field commander, it sparked a dramatic crisis in the area. Not only religious groups took the streets but units from the reliable and effective ARVN 1st Division sided with the protesters. Soon protests escalated to violent activities. Troops from the RVN general reserve had to be deployed north from Saigon to suppress the mutinies and restore order.

US reactions to this crisis were mixed. On one side Washington and MACV fully supported the RVN central government. USAF transport planes even transported combat loaded tanks to Hue. On the other side III MAF, without prior consultation with Westmoreland, took a controversial stance in the crisis and practically appeared to be backing General Thi's supporters in the latter stages. In several cases III MAF elements threatened actions against loyalist ARVN forces, especially the Vietnamese Air Forces, in order to prevent them from carrying out their orders. While in all cases Walt's actions seemed to have been motivated by the need to protect his own troops, the impression given at the time was different. Walt's stance was hardly justifiable even if his intentions were simply to 'keep the antagonists apart'.²⁸⁹ Thi was neither a competent corps commander nor a source of stability. The primary reason for his removal appeared to be his involvement in a possible coup. Thi had certainly produced sufficient indications that he was indeed building a sort of personal domain in the area around Hue.²⁹⁰ His actions after being dismissed were also ambiguous. In summary Thi's presence was destabilizing the I CTZ and the RVN government. Any sort of compromise would have weakened the authority of the central government. Yet Walt was perceived to have sided with Thi until the latter's final departure for the United States. According to Colonel Utter this was due to the personal relationship Walt and Utter had developed with General Thi and

²⁸⁹ Shumlinson, 'Expanding War', p. 82.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 73-74.

out of respect for Thi's leadership abilities. Yet it was also at odds with official US policy.²⁹¹

On the military side the Spring 1966 crisis hampered operations both directly and indirectly. Combined operations between III MAF and ARVN forces ceased, and US unilateral operations were hampered by protests, riots, and civil disturbance tactics like the setting of Buddhist altars in the middle of roads to disrupt movement. Furthermore, unrest in Da Nang, the main supply head for the III MAF, and Hue, whose port facilities were used to forward supplies to III MAF units in both Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, accompanied by the aforementioned disruption on the roads created severe problems for the entire III MAF supply chain to the point that road resupply ceased, and every item had to be moved by helicopter which, in turn, overtaxed III MAF resources and hampered tactical mobility.²⁹² The inability of the III MAF to understand the nature of the political crisis did not bode well for the entire pacification effort. It also highlighted again the disjointed nature of III MAF strategy and its lack of connection with RVN and US national strategies.

The second reason had more to do with enemy actions than internal dissent. By the end of 1967 less and less resources were employed for pacification due to a considerable worsening of the military situation. The III MAF, despite its own illusions, did not possess the resources to pursue an area security campaign and

²⁹¹ Col Leon N . Utter, Comments on draft MS, dtd 13Jul78, Vietnam Comment Files.

²⁹² Shumlinson, *US Marines in Vietnam 1966: An Expanding War*, 1982, p. 90; ' . . . the Buddhists would set shrines down the middle of Highway 1 making the passage of trucks and self-propelled artillery virtually impossible for fear of knocking one of them over . . . ' Col Samuel M . Morrow, Comments on draft MS, dtd 23May78, Vietnam Comment Files; ' . . . nearly all our resupply was by helo . Since ammo had first priority, we frequently got only one meal of C' s [rations] per day . . . ' LtCol Ralph E . Sullivan, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9May78, Vietnam Comment Files.

act as a mobile reserve at the same time. This was especially true in the face of a coordinated enemy main force offensive. Shuffling battalions from one mission to another as envisioned in 1965 did not represent an effective military measure when the PAVN threat escalated from the second half of 1966 onward. The lack of uncommitted mobile reserves forced the III MAF to simply take battalions from area security mission to respond to crises in other areas. Once Marine infantry battalions were moved from their own area or ceased a continuous sweep of communist base areas inside the I CTZ local security deteriorated because the CAP units and local forces did not have the firepower to tackle communist regular units. For all its promises the CAP concept was working only if conventional operations were able to reduce enemy activities. More and more resources had to be committed to deal with VC and PAVN base areas in Thua Thien and Quang Tri in conventional operations, but these resources were only available if the enemy was not attacking across the border. Despite Krulak's assertion that without popular support communist main force units would have withered on the vine and disappeared, they were instead propping up local forces and disrupting pacification operations.

Far from being the perfect geographical area where maximum pressure could be applied against the VC infrastructure as argued by Commandant Greene, the I CTZ, due to its proximity to North Vietnam and long exposed borders, proved to be the perfect area for the communists to apply maximum pressure against Allied pacification programs.²⁹³ The inability of the III MAF to visualize this threat

²⁹³ Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 5 May 78, Vietnam Comment Files; Central Intelligence Agency, *Intelligence Memo: The communist Build up in South Vietnam's*

and properly prevent it ensured that its well-intentioned pacification campaign was doomed to failure.

5.3 Losing the Laotian Border

As already discussed, the III MAF was aware from the autumn of 1965 that their own estimate of enemy intentions could have been wrong, and Hanoi was indeed escalating its involvement in the area. More data were collected in December when elements of the PAVN 325th Division were located in the A Shau Valley. The 325th proceeded to eliminate two ARVN base camps in the valley and then laid siege to the US controlled Special Forces camp located near the hamlet of A Shau. In January the siege became an all-out attack. The A Shau was outside artillery support range and had to rely on air power for support. March's weather deprived the camp's defender of this support, and the PAVN exploited the weather to conduct both an artillery bombardment and several ground attacks on the camp. A Marine battalion was alerted to move to the camp but was never deployed. The result was the fall of the camp and the loss of the last military position in the A Shau Valley, one of the best infiltration corridors from Laos to South Vietnam. Besides being a local military catastrophe the fall of the Special Forces camp increased the rift between the US Army, especially the Special Forces community, and III MAF. Of the 434 effectives of the garrison of A Shau only 180, including 12 Americans, were rescued. The III MAF blamed the Army personnel and their local levies for the disaster. The Special Forces in turn

Northern I Corps, May 11 1967, pp. 1, 7, 10, Box 06, Folder 17 D113.3A, Larry Berman Collection, , The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University; hereafter CIA, 'Communist Build Up'.

put part of the blame on the local troops but also on the inability of the III MAF to support and reinforce the camp.²⁹⁴

Immediate plans for insertion of Allied troops into the valley had to be shelved. The new commander of the ARVN I Corps, General Chuan, one of the replacements for General Thi, wanted to send troops into the valley immediately, but he had no available forces. He asked the Americans to do it. General Westmoreland in turn had to rely on the III MAF, but General Walt was not able or willing to spare troops for such a mission. The slow pace of the US build up and the lack of reserves haunted the III MAF. Furthermore the CO of the 1/4 Marines, the battalion earmarked for a possible relief of the camp, was opposed to such a move. In his view, any operation in the A Shau Valley would have required at least two battalions with a further regiment in reserve in case of heavy contact. Five battalions were more than the III MAF had on hand at Phu Bai at the time and certainly more than could have been supported in the valley by the III MAF resources.²⁹⁵ US Army Vietnam resources were also insufficient. In March 1966 there were no combat battalions to spare for such an endeavour. Faced with the choice between building another unsupported Special Forces Camp or doing nothing, MACV decided to abandon the valley for the time being. While operationally the decision was sound, it allowed the PAVN to turn the

²⁹⁴ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 28.

²⁹⁵ As a matter of comparison when MACV asked again the III MAF to mount an operation in the A Shau Valley in 1968 the logistical estimates required the entire III MAF helicopter fleet, expanded at 1968 levels, to support such an operation.

valley into a giant logistical base that would have a significant impact on Allied operations in the following years.²⁹⁶

The loss of A Shau also played an important role over the fate of the other border outpost guarding the critical east-west river valleys, Khe Sanh. Almost at the same time of the build up around the A Shau camp, reconnaissance patrols operating around Khe Sanh started to pick up signs of increased activity. Immediately the debate between MACV and III MAF on the future of the camp flared up. Both sides clung to their positions for the next year and half with the III MAF pointing out the lack of significance of the camp and MACV insisting it had to be held. For the III MAF, Khe Sanh was in the middle of nowhere, with no sensible population to protect, no military value, isolated, and deprived of any direct support. For Westmoreland and MACV, Khe Sanh possessed several critical qualities that made it an important outpost. Khe Sanh anchored the western end of the DMZ, and, from it, the secretive Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG) staged reconnaissance operations into Laos to monitor and harass PAVN infiltration and movements. Still the most important reason was that Khe Sanh constituted the critical launching point for Operation EL PASO, a proposed corps sized incursion into Laos designed to block the Ho Chi minh trail.²⁹⁷ While EL PASO in the end was never authorized for political reasons, holding Khe Sanh was critical to it. As long an operation into Laos was at least contemplated Khe Sanh had to be held. Westmoreland was immovable on the

²⁹⁶ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', pp. 30-31.

²⁹⁷ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 194-195, 197-198.

subject. MACV insistence led to an escalating commitment of III MAF resources to the remote outpost.

The first confrontation between the two commands over the utility of the outpost occurred almost immediately after the fall of A Shau. With the 325th PAVN Division Identified in the A Shau Valley, the 324B Division located in the DMZ, and the aforementioned political troubles in several cities, MACV feared that Hanoi was willing to risk a conventional confrontation in and around the DMZ.²⁹⁸ Reports from the Khe Sanh camp appeared to confirm these worries. Several contacts with PAVN regular units were reported both by Special Forces, SOG, and Force Recon patrols. In reaction to these sightings and to avoid a repetition of the disaster of A Shau, MACV pressured the III MAF to deploy forces at Khe Sanh. The result was Operation VIRGINIA. The 1/1 Marines was tasked with deploying to the camp and conducting a three phase search and destroy operation there. VIRGINIA started in the worst possible way; with the 1/1 battalion commander questioning Special Forces data and the local Special Forces commander hinting the 1/1 was ordered to not find the enemy.²⁹⁹ VIRGINIA did not find any PAVN concentration, but the Marines did not search in the area where intelligence had located PAVN units. After an unsuccessful first phase the two other phases were cancelled, and, on the insistence of the battalion commander, the 1/1 Marine marched east along the almost completely abandoned Route 9 toward the coast. While the march was praised in the official

²⁹⁸ Msg Westmoreland to Sharp, 8 July 1967 p. 5; CIA, 'Communist Build Up', p. 4

²⁹⁹ Shumlinson, 'Expanding War', p. 141; Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 42-44; letter John D. Waghelstein to Ray Stubbe, 20 August 1985 quoted in Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 42; Col Van D. Bell, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15 Jun78, Vietnam Comment File; 1/1 ComC, Apr66, Opn VIRGINIA AAR enclosure.

history as an incredible feat, the results were only casualties by heat exhaustion and a wrecked battalion that never engaged the enemy.³⁰⁰ It also further poisoned the relationship between the III MAF and the Special Forces.

Despite the III MAF view that VIRGINIA had demonstrated the PAVN was not there, intelligence reports continued to flood MACV HQ in Saigon. On 27 September 1966 a SOG patrol came upon a PAVN base camp due north of Khe Sanh and visually identified at least a company of North Vietnamese regulars.³⁰¹

Despite the denials of the III MAF, the PAVN's build up continued unabated and was duly reported by Army channels to MACV back in Saigon. Khe Sanh also represented a point of contention between Westmoreland's and Walt's views of the war. Walt and, to a lesser extent, other Marine officers believed Khe Sanh and the entire border was not a critical element. Walt came to the point of decrying the entire concern over infiltration in a private letter to a colleague.³⁰²

On the other side MACV numbers on infiltration were worrisome; in 1966 alone the confirmed estimate was put at around 7,000 infiltrators per month with estimates running high as 12,500.³⁰³ On the opposite side III MAF pinned infiltration at around 1,500 per month.³⁰⁴ III MAF data were highly suspicious and, considering the way it reported PAVN units and ignored intelligence that

³⁰⁰ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 44; Colonel Chaisson defined the 'march to the sea' just a little bravado and to do it a little differently from anyone else up there' Transcript of LtGen John R. Chaisson intvw by Hist&MusDiv, dtd 3Apr72, OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, pp. 371-372.

³⁰¹ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 48.

³⁰² Letter, Walt to Buse 29 December 1966, (serial 0002000966) appended to III MAF OPLAN 121-66, Walt Papers, USMC Archives. As counterpoint MACV was stating the majority of infiltration originated from Laos MACV, 1967, p. 42; COMNAVFORV INTSUM No. 1-67 (C), Westmoreland Papers, CMH.

³⁰³ MACV, 1967, p. 36; also see Msg Westmoreland to Sharp, 8 July 1967 p. 2, Westmoreland Papers CMH.

³⁰⁴ III MAF ComC Apr 67.

was not supporting the III MAF concept of operations in the past, the data also hinted at a severe command failure. Considering that Walt's letter was written at a time, December 1966, when infiltration had already reached dangerous levels, Walt's ideas appeared out of place. Walt's letter also left open the whole question of what the III MAF construed as security. The PAVN had already shown its capability to mass forces from Laos in early 1966 against the A Shau camp. The most important political target in the I CTZ, Hue, was indeed in striking distance from the Laotian border and from the conduit represented by the A Shau Valley, yet Walt ignored real evidence of enemy capabilities. Several III MAF officers had expressed the idea that III MAF did not want to be distracted from its main focus on the southern portion of I CTZ. Downplaying enemy presence north of the Hai Van pass would have fit this approach. Refusal to engage PAVN units would have resulted in fewer combat actions and on the impression of a quiet area. Still, considering the comments made by General Rosson when he took command at Chu Lai and the results of the operations of Task Force Oregon in the southern I CTZ, the entire idea of III MAF security is left open to debate.³⁰⁵

As the 1968 Tet offensive has clearly shown, Laos was the main conduit of PAVN activity against the coastal lowlands of the I CTZ.³⁰⁶ By the end of 1966, the Laotian border had been lost by the Allies and only Khe Sanh was holding.

³⁰⁵ Rosson, 13 Sept 1977, ORLL 196th Light Inf Brigade, 1 Feb-30 Apr 67 and 1 May-31 Jul 67; MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', p. 243.

³⁰⁶ E. Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue* (Fort McNair: Center of Military History) p. 27; MACV 1968, pp. 24, 57, 159; IIIMAF ComdC, Apr68, p. 19; LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Jr., debriefing on A Shau Valley Operation, Da Nang, 2May68, in Cushman Transcript Book, p. 480, HQMC. Also see the operation of the 2nd PAVN division in Quang Nam province and its abortive thrust toward Da Nang Lehrack, 'Road', pp. 263-265.

Despite the assertion that the PAVN did not want Khe Sanh, PAVN activities were pointing to the contrary. MACV insistence in holding Khe Sanh was thus justified especially in the light of Westmoreland's hopes regarding Laos. In 1967 Khe Sanh became the theatre of a series of heavy engagements between the III MAF and PAVN forces collectively known as the 'Hill Fights' during April and May 1967. These battles coincided with a series of determined pushes across the DMZ and constituted both a conventional offensive on the part of the PAVN to achieve some sort of decisive local victory and a way to divert III MAF and MACV resources from other parts of Vietnam.³⁰⁷ The Hill Fights, while ultimately a Marine victory, also challenged Walt's underestimation of the PAVN. Victory was not easily achieved, and it required massive resources. At the peak of the Hill Fights a force roughly equal to five Marine battalions was committed in various roles to the area with extensive artillery and air support.³⁰⁸ PAVN fortifications were so extensive that several bunkers required direct hits from 2,000 pound bombs to be knocked out.³⁰⁹ The Hill Fights were only the prelude to an even larger confrontation for the Allied outpost that started in December 1967.

By December, the PAVN had cut Route 9, Khe Sanh's lifeline, and had deployed the equivalent of three infantry divisions backed with heavy artillery against the base. Four Marine battalions, the whole 26th Marine Regiment and the 1/9 Marines, one ARVN ranger battalion, the 37th, and supporting units including tanks, artillery and Special Forces and local militias were under siege. On the

³⁰⁷ MSG Westmoreland to Sharp, 8 July 1967, p. 15, Message Files, CMH.

³⁰⁸ MACV, 1968, pp. 358-359.

³⁰⁹ Telfer, Rogers, & Fleming, 'Fighting the North Vietnamese', p. 39; 2/3 Marines ComC Apr-May 67.

night between 20 and 21 January the Marine outpost on Hill 861S was attacked by a large enemy force. On the same day a force estimated as a reinforced regiment attacked the district capital at Khe Sanh village being repulsed for a day until, after a botched relief attempt, the defenders were forced to withdraw. On 9 February another regimental sized attack supported by tanks overran the outlying Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. At the same time the main combat base was constantly shelled and at least two ground attacks were attempted. While the exact reasons behind the siege are still debated the fact that the PAVN was able to mass three divisions without any real interference from the III MAF further compromised the pacification focus.

5.4 Defending the DMZ, round one

Even if in early 1966, with the attack on the A Shau, the Laotian border appeared to be the focus of PAVN activities, the possibility of a direct cross border attack across the demilitarized zone had always been part of pre-war American planning for Vietnam. While a Korean style invasion had been almost a fixation in US circles and also one of the reasons for the initial ground force commitment in 1965 by 1966, it had been relegated to a remote eventuality. Yet despite the worries expressed, the III MAF was not overly concerned with the possibility of such an event. How far this lack of concern was a product of General Walt's own convictions or of the lack of significant activity along the DMZ is difficult to ascertain. Even if securing the DMZ had been the highest priority of the III MAF, there were no troops to do that at the time and immediate priorities lay

elsewhere.

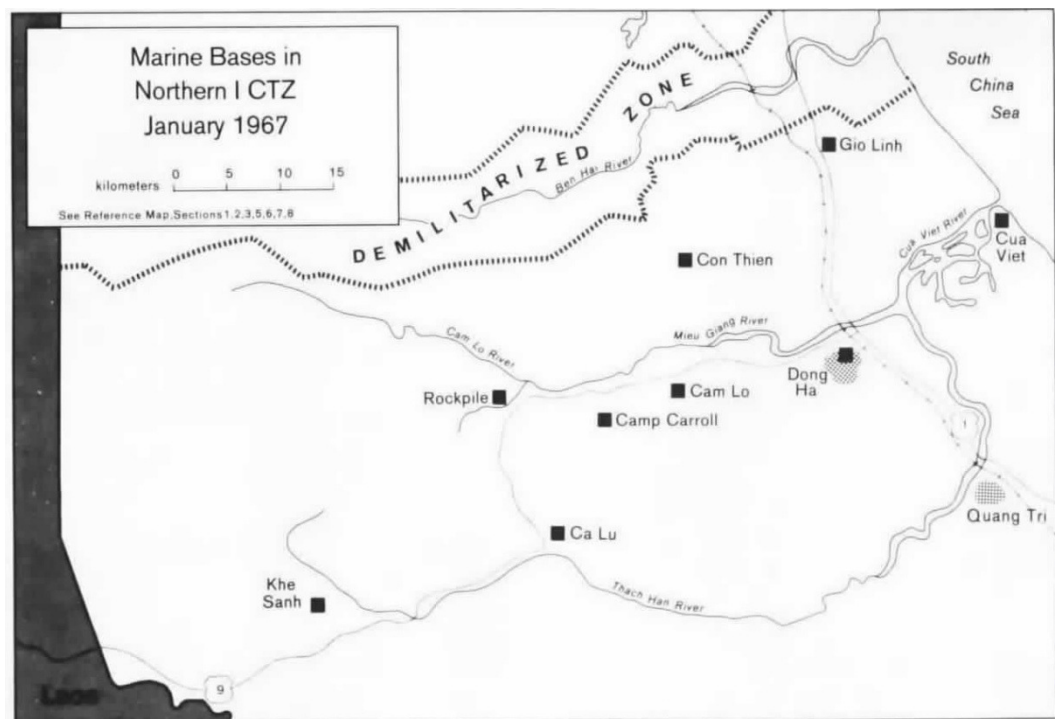


Figure 3: Marine bases along the DMZ (Telfer et al, 1984, p. 7)

With the Fall of A Shau in January the bulk of large scale conventional activity was concentrated on the Laotian rather than northern border. Not until June 1966, when MACV intelligence started to pick up signals of a large enemy grouping north or inside the DMZ, was III MAF interested in the northern border, and, even then, MACV intelligence was debated and disputed.³¹⁰

It is true that during the first months of 1966 intelligence reports were vague but, in April 1966, MACV intelligence picked up indicators of the redeployment of substantial PAVN forces above the DMZ. The 324B Infantry division was reported to be moving from Ha Tinh to the DMZ. Intelligence estimates identified three regular infantry regiments in Thua Thien and Quang Tri and, more ominously,

³¹⁰ CGIIIMAF msg to CGFMFPac, dtd 22Apr 66, Messages Files, USMC History Division; Col Donald W. Sherman intvw by FMFPac, dtd 6Aug66, No. 199, OralHistColl, USMC History Division.

the identification of a new headquarters in the two provinces.³¹¹ Yet, despite the data available, III MAF at Da Nang was not persuaded this was the prelude for a general, or even limited, offensive. While agreeing on the existence of some sort of build-up of enemy forces, III MAF J-2 (Intelligence) section was more conservative in its own estimates. Only on April 15 a third infantry regiment (the 6th) was placed on the enemy order of battle, and the Marines argued that even with a full Regiment, 4th Marines, now deployed to Phu Bai, contacts had been sparse notwithstanding intelligence reports. The III MAF HQ at Da Nang was denying that such a large build up was taking place. This lack of concern with MACV intelligence was only reinforced by the lack of success obtained during Operation VIRGINIA.³¹² The divide between MACV and Army intelligence estimates and sources and III MAF ones was at its peak in 1966. The Marines resisted, as one III MAF staff officer remembered, every effort to 'get us extended and away from the pacification campaign further south'.³¹³

Despite this stance on what was happening on the DMZ, General Westmoreland was not convinced of the Marines' analysis. During the commander conference held in April, Westmoreland ordered them to 'work up detailed scenarios of what the enemy might do'.³¹⁴ His line of thinking was that the enemy was trying to divert US and RVN attention from pacification to operations in areas where US forces would have been at disadvantage. He thus insisted that planning and war

³¹¹ MACV, 1966, p. 25.

³¹² III MAF ComC Apr 1966, Col Donald W. Sherman intvw by FMFPac, dtd 6Aug66, No. 199, OralHistColl, USMC History Division.

³¹³ Transcript of LtGen John R. Chaisson intvw by Hist&MusDiv, dtd 3Apr72, OralHistColl, USMC History Division, p. 376.

³¹⁴ Minutes of MACV Commanders' Conference, dtd 24Apr66, v. 6, Tab A, end 2, Westmoreland Papers, CMH.

gaming had to be carried out to prevent such an eventuality. The two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, in Westmoreland's eyes, were a prime target for such a spoiling attack. The presence of the Imperial Capital of Hue was of tremendous political and symbolical significance, and, due to the geographical constraints already discussed, the two provinces could have been easily isolated from the rest of Vietnam simply by cutting the Van Hai pass.³¹⁵ In the light of these elements and the political instability caused by the 'Buddhist uprising', it was natural for Westmoreland to be concerned with the area despite the III MAF protests. MACV concerns were further highlighted by an outburst of enemy activity in May. Aerial reconnaissance started to provide more and more direct evidence of an enemy build-up. On 19 May, two ARVN outposts were attacked by large forces. On the same day a North Vietnamese deserter told his captors that the 324B Division had already infiltrated south of the DMZ. On 22 May the ARVN 2nd Regiment engaged a company sized enemy force 8km from the town of Dong Ha, close to the DMZ.

Basing his decision on these indicators, Westmoreland directed the III MAF to start active reconnaissance operations along the border which duly started on 20 June 1966 using elements from the specialized Force Reconnaissance supported by infantry to provide base security and reaction forces.³¹⁶ As it was customary for operations ordered by Saigon, the III MAF did not expect significant results

³¹⁵ MACV, 1966, p. 33.

³¹⁶ The Force Recon was a specialized corps level organization (not to be confused with the division reconnaissance battalions organic to the four Marine divisions) designed to provide tactical and operational intelligence gathering capabilities.

from the recon effort.³¹⁷ General Walt's attitude toward the DMZ could be summarized as dismissing the matter as peripheral to his own campaign plan. But, on this occasion, MACV intelligence proved to be very accurate. The reconnaissance activity was quickly curtailed by enemy actions. Contacts with uniformed and well equipped enemy formations were constant, and reconnaissance teams were unable to stay in the field more than a few hours or, in some cases, even minutes.³¹⁸ According to Lieutenant Colonel (then Major) Dwayne A. Colby, the officer in charge of the reconnaissance effort, General Walt was, initially, not persuaded by the reports from the field, and he seemed more inclined to simply replace Colby as an ineffective leader rather than believe his reports. Only witnesses from the reconnaissance teams persuaded him to the contrary.³¹⁹ At last III MAF was persuaded that the DMZ was indeed a military problem.

Even with this intelligence, III MAF response was still slow. III MAF HQ wanted more accurate intelligence on enemy formations before re-deploying units already assigned to other tasks. Thus the ongoing reconnaissance effort was expanded and named Operation HASTINGS. Still, the kind of accurate intelligence wanted by the III MAF staff was difficult to obtain because reconnaissance teams were again frustrated in their gathering efforts by constant fire-fights with North Vietnamese forces.³²⁰ Even with this incomplete

³¹⁷ LtCol Dwain A. Colby, Comments on draft MS, dtd 2 Jun78 Vietnam Comment Files.

³¹⁸ LtCol Dwain A. Colby, Comments on draft MS, dtd 2 Jun78 Vietnam Comment Files.

³¹⁹ Colby even point out that one of the teams debriefed General Walt minutes after being extracted from a fire-fight; LtCol Dwain A . Colby, Comments on draft MS, dtd 2 Jun78 Vietnam Comment Files.

³²⁰ Task Force Delta AAR Opn Hastings, dtd 17Sep66, pp. 4-5, Folder 062, USMC Collection, thereafter TF Delta AAR.

intelligence gathering effort, the data collected was disturbing. Constant contacts resulted in the recording of more than 300 PAVN soldiers through visual spotting. More intelligence was obtained by prisoner's and deserter's interrogations that confirmed the presence of all three organic regiments, 90th, 803rd and 812th, of the 324B division across the DMZ.³²¹ These further reports and the continuous level of activity in the area finally shook the confidence of the III MAF. The 3rd Marine Division Commander, Major General Wood Kyle, pressed Walt for a major operation.³²² Walt in turn asked permission from MACV to mount a multi-battalion operation in the area; a permission that was easy to obtain.

HASTINGS thus evolved from a reconnaissance operation to a multi-battalion joint USMC-ARVN sweep of the area immediately south of the DMZ, the DMZ itself being still an inviolable sanctuary. Four USMC and five ARVN battalions, two infantry and three airborne, were assigned to HASTINGS. While impressive on paper, HASTINGS was less impressive on the ground. Two of the five battalions were initially tied up in defending static positions and artillery firebases, a common problem at this stage. Later, two other battalions were added to the order of battle expanding the available rifle strength. One of these battalions was the Special Landing Force (SLF) after clearance for its use was obtained from FMFPAC and 7th Fleet.

³²¹ TF Delta AAR, p. 5

³²² Major General Wood B Kyle assumed command of the 3rd Marine Division on March 18 1966 from General Walt. He won two silver stars at Guadalcanal and Tarawa. His words in motivating the action were 'move troops north to try to get them [the North Vietnamese] out of there and drive them back.' Transcript of MajGen Wood B. Kyle intvw by HistDiv, dtd 9, 12, and 16Jun69 Oral HistColl, USMC History Division, p .185

The inclusion of the SLF in Operation HASTINGS is important to show how awkward the arrangements for reinforcing the III MAF were and the problematic stance taken by General Walt in keeping all its battalions involved in pacification missions. Special Landing Forces were reinforced battalions held on an amphibious assault ship in the South China Sea or in Okinawa and the Philippines to provide the 7th Fleet with a landing force for contingencies. This arrangement had the positive effect of keeping them at an higher effective strength than battalions stationed in Vietnam and with an higher combat efficiency.³²³ On the debit side, SLFs were outside the III MAF chain of command, and their employment in Vietnam required a complex process involving the III MAF, MACV HQ in Saigon and both 7th Fleet in Japan and CINCPAC in Pearl Harbour. While they were used often as reserves, they were for all practical purposes temporary reinforcements to the theatre.

Operation HASTINGS started on July 15, 1966 and ended on August 3 when the operation was terminated because of diminishing contacts and reports of enemy units moving back north across the DMZ.³²⁴ The results of the operation were extremely positive with 788 confirmed enemy KIA, 908 probable KIA and 17 North Vietnamese prisoners.³²⁵ The operation was the largest and most intensive action fought by the Marines to date. In the first days, PAVN units operated in battalion and regimental strength contesting Marine moves. 3/4

³²³ During operation HASTINGS General English, TF Delta commander was reported to have reacted to the sight of the 3/5 Marines, the SLF units exclaiming 'I had forgotten how big a real battalion is.' Col Noble L .Beck, Comments on draft MS, n. d. [Aug 78], Vietnam Comment Files. During operation HASTINGS the 5 committed battalions from the 3rd Marine Division averaged 558 men on July 15, the D-Day of the operation, the 3/5 mustered 1333 between officers and enlisted ratings. TF Delta AAR, p. 22.

³²⁴ Shumlinson, 'Expanding war', p. 175

³²⁵ TF Delta AAR, p. 22.

Marines was particularly badly hit in the opening stages.³²⁶ During the night between 16 and 17 July the 2/4 and 3/4 Marines joined the fight and, deploying a total of six companies on the ground, were savagely attacked by a strong PAVN force. The assault was driven off after four hours of fighting, but, one day later, on July 18, Company K, 3/4 Marines was hit in broad daylight by another PAVN assault. Even if every engagement during HASTINGS turned to the Marines favour, the PAVN had shown no reluctance to operate in large formations and close with American firepower, prompting General Walt to comment:

We found them well equipped, well trained, and aggressive to the point of fanaticism. They attacked in mass formations and died by the hundreds. Their leaders had misjudged the fighting ability of U.S. Marines and ARVN soldiers together; our superiority in artillery and total command of the air. They had vastly underestimated . . . our mobility.³²⁷

General Walt's comment is relevant for two reasons. The first is the admission that Marines had found in the PAVN a competent enemy, and the other the reiteration of the stance that the PAVN had no chances of victory in conventional operation against US forces. While HASTINGS' results confirmed this assumption, it was against a backdrop of the use of considerable Allied resources on the ground. The engagements between July 16 and 18 saw two USMC battalions operating together with massive air and artillery support and yet, while successful, they were hard fought and in some moments desperate. In the

³²⁶ 23 dead and 194 wounded incurred in the period between July 15 and 20 on a reported strength of 525 between officers and enlisted men. In just one day (July 20) India Company suffered 7 dead; TF Delta AAR p. 12 and 3/4 Marines AAR 10/04/66, TF Delta AAR enclosure 5.

³²⁷ Walt, *'Strange War'*, p. 141

engagement of July 18, Company K, 3/4 Marines lost 14 dead and 49 wounded against a strength of 130 effectives.³²⁸ Overall during the operation, 6 PAVN battalions were engaged by a total of 5 ARVN and up to 5 USMC battalions (two battalions from the 1st Marine Regiment, 1/1 and 2/1, were added on D+5) supported by seven artillery batteries.³²⁹ How American units would have fared with less overwhelming odds and less support was not clarified by HASTINGS.

HASTINGS also highlighted problems in the command and control of such large forces combined together from different organizations. One critical area singled out by local commanders was the lack of integration between the reconnaissance component and the line battalions. Reconnaissance teams were inserted in battalion areas of operations without prior warning or coordination, and intelligence was not disseminated horizontally. To a certain extent the problems at the base of the failure of Operation VIRGINIA and the lack of interest in reconnaissance activities that plagued Khe Sanh were repeated in the HASTINGS area even in the absence of the inter-service rivalry plaguing the former operation.

Notwithstanding the unanswered questions about the results, Operation HASTINGS was immediately replaced by Operation PRAIRIE, or more correctly, Area of Operation PRAIRIE on 3 August. PRAIRIE was a series of scaled down continuous operations designed to keep up the pressure on PAVN infiltration across the DMZ while at the same time freeing Marine battalions for other operations; only one infantry battalion was allocated to PRAIRIE.

³²⁸ TF Delta AAR, pp. 10-11.

³²⁹ TF Delta AAR, pp. 2-3.

This reduction in activity brought MACV and III MAF into conflict again. Almost immediately after the conclusion of HASTINGS, MACV intelligence again pointed toward a new build-up of PAVN formations north or even inside the DMZ. FMFPAC commander, General Krulak, was adamant that the PAVN was avoiding contact and withdrawing while COMUSMACV, General Westmoreland, was equally adamant that this was not the case.³³⁰ Krulak maintained that the PAVN was withdrawing and eschewing contact while Westmoreland was instead arguing that the North Vietnamese were preparing for a renewed offensive. What was more striking was that these differences in opinions were based on the same intelligence data collected on the ground. What was making this analysis so different was a lack of an understanding of enemy intentions. In the vacuum created from this lack of knowledge, the interested parties put their own assumptions at the forefront. Westmoreland and Saigon were concerned about a thrust toward Quang Tri and Hue while III MAF was not; both commands and commanders simply read the data based on their own interpretations of enemy intentions. Still, despite high level debates, on the ground contacts and engagements with increased numbers of PAVN troops continued throughout the summer despite Krulak's assertions to the contrary. Certainly the PAVN was not retreating, but it was trying to establish itself permanently on the DMZ and use these encroachments to harass Marine positions. If HASTINGS had been centred on the eastern half of the DMZ, during Operation PRAIRIE the activity shifted to the central and western part of it, with 'The Rockpile' becoming a prominent

³³⁰ CGFMFPac msg to III MAF, dtd 22Ju166 (HQMC Msg File); MACV, 1966, p. 26.

hotspot.³³¹ Combined pressure from the PAVN and MACV again forced the deployment of additional resources to the DMZ area. The commander of the 4th Marine Regiment, Colonel Cereghino, argued that there was indeed a new build up in the DMZ as early as August 9.³³² Thus the bulk of the 4th Marine Regiment was moved north, and PRAIRIE quickly expanded. The period between August 13 and October 4 was punctuated by several battalion size contacts. At the height of PRAIRIE six infantry battalions operated along the DMZ supported by artillery and tanks. In September the 3rd Marine Division was officially moved from Da Nang to Phu Bai, a small village north of the imperial capital of Hue, and its area of operations shifted north to encompass Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. This move and the concurrent deployment of a full Marine battalion to Khe Sanh further strained the relationship between MACV and III MAF. According to Walt, the enemy had succeeded in drawing his scarce forces away from the coastal lowlands and into an area where it would have been able to exploit a more favourable attrition rate. For Westmoreland, the defence of the border was paramount for the security of those same coastal lowlands; the debate between the two continued without any solution in sight.

³³¹ Rockpile was a rocky outcrop, as the name suggests, located 16 miles west of Dong Ha. It was later the site of an important fire base that played a critical role in supporting both the battles on the DMZ and Khe Sanh.

³³² Col Alexander D. Cereghino intvw by FMFPac, n .d., No.450 ,Oral HistColl, USMC History Division.

Chapter 6: The Years of the Offensives 1967-1968

6.1 Introduction

General Westmoreland rightly defined 1967 and 1968 as the years of decision in Vietnam.³³³ Both sides stood poised for a series of conventional battles spanning the whole length of the country, a series of battles that would have shaped the course of the war. For MACV, 1967 was supposed to start with a series of decisive operations in the III CTZ around Saigon. Westmoreland's aim was to bleed the 9th VC Division there and force it back into its sanctuaries in Cambodia to remove the threat to pacification in that important area.³³⁴ To achieve this aim the bulk of the American forces in Vietnam would have been committed in the III CTZ. At the same time MACV wanted to keep PAVN units infiltrating from Laos away from the populated valley and coastal plains in the Central Highlands comprising the bulk of the II CTZ using units of the 4th US Infantry Division. The 1st Cavalry Division, South Korean, and South Vietnamese forces would have hit the enemy on the coastal plains of the II CTZ. In the north, in III MAF's realm, Westmoreland mainly wanted to protect the big cities, the Laotian Border and the DMZ. Still, he also envisioned some large scale operation there in late 1967 or early 1968 after his big battles in the III CTZ would have been successfully concluded. This concept of operations was predicated on the assumption that Hanoi's strategy would not have changed from the previous year.

On the other side, Hanoi's generals started 1967 persuaded they could inflict a serious defeat on the US forces on the battlefield to arrest the losing attritional trend that had started in 1967. When this goal proved unattainable, the North Vietnamese leadership

³³³ MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', p. 4.

³³⁴ Ibid, p. 95

switched from the search for a conventional, big unit victory to a political victory that was to produce a full scale uprising in the whole of South Vietnam. The “General Offensive-General Uprising” concept was designed in the hope that a country-wide military offensive directed against the ARVN and the RVN government would have collapsed them. To create the necessary conditions for such an undertaking, the second half of 1967 would have seen another round of big battles along the borders of South Vietnam designed to cover increased troop movement and inflict casualties on Allied forces forcing them to spread out everywhere. The 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising, widely known as the Tet Offensive because it started during the Tet religious holiday, did not meet Hanoi’s expectations. The ARVN did not collapse under pressure, the RVN population sided with the government, and the Allied forces exploited it to unleash a series of counteroffensives that inflicted huge losses on their communist opponent and set back their timetables by several years.

In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, MACV, at peak ground strength, launched a series of ambitious offensives in several areas of Vietnam. Due to a combination of American initiatives and reaction to North Vietnamese moves between March 1968 and the end of 1969, the I CTZ became the geographical focus of Allied operations. With the area around Saigon relatively secure, MACV decided to concentrate American forces in the I CTZ in the hope of reducing the pressure on Quang Tri and Hue and improving the security of the ancient imperial city to avoid any chance of a repetition of the bloody 1968 battle for the city. Both Westmoreland and his successor, General Creighton Abrams, directed the bulk of large scale offensive operations on the DMZ area, Route 9 across Laos, and the A Shau Valley. This policy of exerting maximum pressure on enemy forces bore dividends in the form of reduced enemy attacks on the coastal cities and interdiction of enemy supply lines, but it also produced high American casualties that, in turn, generated a shift in US policies in 1969. This chapter will cover both the Summer-

Autumn battles along the DMZ in the Quang Tri province and the battles of the 1968 Tet Offensive and subsequent Allied counteroffensives.

6.2 The McNamara Line and the evolution of the frontier strategy

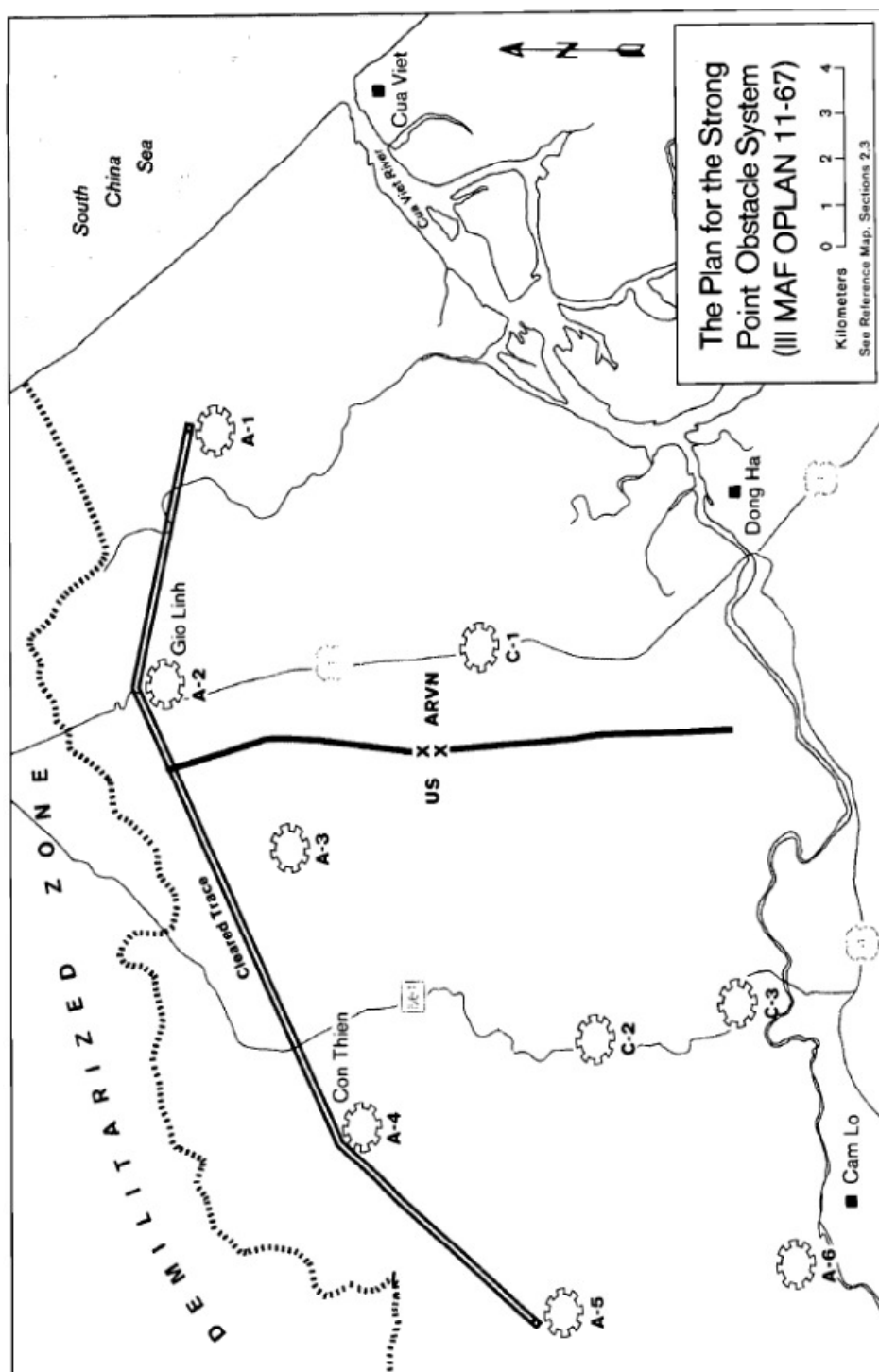


Figure 4: Proposed Obstacle System, the McNamara line (Telfer et al, 1984, p. 90)

While MACV was gearing up for a series of massive blows against the communist forces in the areas around Saigon and further north, another, even more acrimonious, source of controversy between MACV and III MAF came with the development and implementation of the concept that has been popularized as the McNamara Line. This originally developed at the instigation of the Secretary of Defense as an anti-infiltration barrier based on electronic sensors, minefields and air interdiction in early 1966; by December of the same year, it had evolved into a more complex scheme involving both electronic devices and physical strongpoints manned by combat troops.³³⁵ The original McNamara scheme, PRACTICE NINE, had been strongly opposed by CINCPAC, Admiral Sharp, as well as by III MAF. It had also been rejected by COMUSMACV.³³⁶ The revised plan, DYE MARKER, instead become a sort of pet project for Westmoreland, or at least it was seen this way by the Marines. DYE MARKER was an extensive and expensive barrier based on a physical system of strongpoints along the South Vietnam DMZ from the coast to the Laotian border where it was to be supplemented by an electronic barrier supported by air interdiction.³³⁷

On paper the project promised to be a cost effective measure to control infiltration or, as McNamara originally hoped, make infiltration absurdly expensive. Even if it was not able to stop infiltration along the DMZ, it was hoped it would provide a tactical advantage by channelling enemy forces into specific areas where they could have been destroyed by conventional means. Despite the promises, the project ran into troubles almost from the start. General Lewis

³³⁵ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 140-146

³³⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, Book 5, V. II p. 43.

³³⁷ 3rd Mar Div ComC, Oct 66, Encl 2.

Walt was vocal in his vehement opposition to the concept from the start. His main objection was that building and manning the line would have tied up, at the least, the entire 3rd Marine Division without providing any benefit. Walt did not like the idea of committing forces on a permanent basis to protect the DMZ.

Walt's assertion was quickly supported by events on the ground. Just the preliminary work on the "coastal" part of the line tied up Marine battalion after Marine battalion requiring constant reinforcements and, despite a strong influx of US Army formations into the I CTZ, eating any reserve strike force MACV and III MAF were hoping to build. It was also extremely costly in human lives. Working in close proximity to the DMZ put the Marines given the task of building the system within the range of PAVN artillery emplacements which were often immune to Allied counter-battery fire due to the longer range of PAVN guns.³³⁸ In a III MAF estimate the human cost to emplace the barrier was tallied at 672 US KIA, 3788 US WIA, 112 ARVN KIA and 642 ARVN WIA.³³⁹

Casualties were not the only problem of the revised project. Estimates over the force required to man the complete barrier increased from two regiments to two complete infantry divisions backed up by armour reserves; forces that neither MACV nor the RVN General Headquarters were able to spare. While later Westmoreland himself claimed to have lost faith in the barrier project during the summer of 1967, the surviving documentary evidence does not support the

³³⁸ PAVN Artillery was mainly comprised of Soviet made 122mm, 152mm, and 130mm field guns and gun/howitzers with a range of 15,300 meters, 18,000 meters, and 27,000 meters respectively. American artillery rested on 105mm and 155mm with 11,000 and meters 14,600 meters ranges. A limited number of longer range guns (175mm) was available and these were the only ones with comparable range to PAVN artillery with an effective range of 32,700 meters.

³³⁹ III MAF Dye Marker Msg File, 13 Sep 1967, USMC History Division, Quantico.

claim.³⁴⁰ COMUSMACV was still actively interested in the project and expressing satisfaction for even small progress as well as impatience at delay. This continued interest in a project that was becoming costly had been linked to Westmoreland's concurrent planning for his proposed multidivisional push into Laos, OPLAN EL PASO.³⁴¹ Striking hard westward along RC9 would not only have required holding Khe Shan but also protecting the length of RC9. The DYE MARKER line promised to protect the northern flank of a hypothetical push to Tchepone. The two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam became thus the critical springboard of Westmoreland's war winning move. While this plan never materialized, the fact that DYE MARKER had become an important element of EL PASO tied up the 3rd Marine Division to implementing it notwithstanding a lack of resources and the increasing casualties.

During the summer of 1967, General Walt left Vietnam to go back to the US and was replaced by Major General Robert Cushman on 1 June 1967.³⁴² Cushman was determined to repair the strained relationship between MACV and III MAF and dropped the III MAF opposition to the line concept. Cushman had been deputy commander of III MAF from April and was aware of the DYE MARKER

³⁴⁰ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 146-147; Westmoreland, 'Soldier Reports', p. 200; Telfer, et al, 'Fighting The North Vietnamese', p. 93; Westmoreland to Cushman, III MAF Dye Marker Msg File 22 Oct 67, USMC History Division.

³⁴¹ See p. 211.

³⁴² Robert E. Cushman (1914-1985) entered the Marine Corps in 1935. Between 1936 and 1938 he served in Shanghai. During World War Two he held a variety of positions and from 1943 he commanded the 2nd Battalion 9th Marines. He led the unit at Bougainville, Guam and Iwo Jima. At Iwo he lost two companies in the so called "Cushman Pocket". After the war he was involved in the USMC school system as instructor, worked at the CIA in 1949-51 and was Nixon's assistant for security affairs during his tenure as vice-president. In September 1962 he assumed command of the 3rd Marine Division at Okinawa and then moved back to the US for staff assignment including being Assistant Chief of Staff (Intelligence) for the USMC Commandant. After leaving Vietnam in 1969 he served as Deputy Director CIA until becoming the 25th Commandant of the US Marine Corps on 1 January 1972 finally retiring on 30 June 1972.

problems, but he never explained his acquiescence in the project once he assumed III MAF command. Prados has advanced the idea that his primary motivation was the necessity to mend the relationship with MACV, while the Marine official history claimed it was because of his conversion to the view that the line would free troops for other tasks once completed.³⁴³ Despite General Cushman's hopes, the barrier never lived up to its promises. During the summer of 1967 the situation along the DMZ became critical warranting additional reinforcements and a massive infusion of US Army forces in the I CTZ to allow the Marines to maintain the pace of the construction works.

6.3 The PAVN Summer-Fall offensive

Despite a sizeable influx of US Army reinforcements in the III MAF TAOR, the Marines were not able to gain the initiative nor were the Army reinforcements able to alter the strategic situation. Every US Army manoeuvre battalion shipped north was only replacing an USMC one that was then swallowed in the static defensive tasks of the DYE MARKER project. DYE MARKER was even forcing the 3rd Marine Division to scale down its commitment to the other priority areas MACV deemed critical such as Khe Sanh. The situation was compounded by two additional factors. III MAF still downplayed the threat of PAVN regular formations and especially their ability to confront the Marines in regular, firepower intensive actions. Due to its unwillingness to scale down the

³⁴³ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 158, Telfer, et al, 'Fighting the North Vietnamese', p. 91; Prados associates the longstanding association of General Cushman with the intelligence community for the lack of explanation. General Cushman himself commented on the USMC official history 'Your handling of the "*stupid*" barrier concept and operation was even handed.' General Cushman comments on Draft Manuscript 17May81, Vietnam Comment Files.

pacification commitment, III MAF was not able to provide standby reserve forces with the exception of embarked SLFs. III MAF's and MACV's competing and conflicting requirements and priorities were thus putting an overextended 3rd Marine Division in grave danger.

On the morning of 2 July 1967, disaster finally struck. B Company, 1/9 Marines was ambushed by a large unit of PAVN regulars during a routine patrol from the combat base at Con Thien, one of the major strong points of the DYE MARKER project.³⁴⁴ A Company of the same battalion, operating in a contiguous area, tried to reach B Company but was stalled by another PAVN major formation. C Company, undergoing a rest and refit period, had to be helicoptered into the area, and a rescue force comprising a tank platoon and a platoon from D Company was assembled to relieve the two beleaguered companies in contact. Despite the subsequent insertion of another battalion, 3/9 Marines, the III MAF northern reserve, A and B Companies were effectively destroyed. When Captain Radcliffe, the officer in charge of the relief force with tanks and infantry, finally linked up with B Company, he found the company's effective strength down to an NCO, Sergeant Burns, and less than a dozen survivors. At the same time, A Company was under assault by PAVN forces supported by a large concentration of tube artillery firing from the northern half of the DMZ; artillery concentrations were also fired on the battalion combat base at Con Thien. For the first time in the war, the Marines were not only outnumbered but also outgunned. III MAF secured the release of two SLFs, 1/3 and 2/3, for a push north labelled Operation BUFFALO. PAVN forces were not willing to yield, and several sharp actions

³⁴⁴ 1/9 ComC July 67.

followed including a battalion sized attack against A Company, 1/9 on 5 July and a massed attack on the night between 6 and 7 July.

Despite being considered a resounding Marine victory and netting huge enemy casualties, BUFFALO was a disaster. For once PAVN casualties were only marginally greater than USMC casualties, and, in the case of the hard luck 1/9 Marines, the inverse was true. At the end of 13 days of operations the battalion had suffered 113 KIA, 290 WIA and 1 MIA (34 percent of the reported monthly average strength) while inflicting 224 confirmed KIA, 141 probable KIA and capturing one PAVN soldier during the period between 2 and 14 July.³⁴⁵ During the first day of the operation, the two ambushed companies were engaged by a force estimated as at least two infantry battalions supported by at least six and up to 8 batteries of artillery.³⁴⁶ With PAVN offensive actions continuing unabated for several days, intelligence estimates of involved enemy forces were constantly revised upwards. In contrast, Marine forces were under strength and overstretched. On 2 July, 1/9 Marines had only 3 companies under control, A, B and D, with company C being rested at the Regimental HQ at Dong Ha. Likewise, 3/9 Marines used only 3 companies during the operation, and these companies were at the time involved in other operations. Artillery support was crucial as was the presence of tanks, 4 M48A3 from B Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, whose

³⁴⁵ 1/9 Marines ComC July 1967, AAR Operation Buffalo, hereafter Operation BUFFALO 1/9. The majority of the casualties were suffered on 2 July with 51 KIA, 170 WIA and 34 MIA as reported by the battalion, Msg from CO THIRD MARDIV to CO III MAF 0222130Z July 1967, III MAF ComC July 1967. It is also necessary to note that from 1 July to 2 July the battalion was involved in Operation CIMARRON a routine security operation around con Thien in support of engineering activities along the defensive barrier. Operation CIMARRON tabulated 3 USMC KIA and 74 WIA in addition to the one reported for operation BUFFALO, 1/9 Marines Command Chronology July 1967, AAR Operation CIMARRON and AAR operation BUFFALO enclosures.

³⁴⁶ THIRD MARDIV to III MAF 0222130Z July 1967

firepower was critical in the advance of the relief force and the rescue of the survivors of B Company with their main armament credited with 70 confirmed enemy KIA.³⁴⁷ The operation also evidenced a continuing inability of the Marines to properly utilize a combined arms approach, a legacy of the lack of integrated training in the late Fifties and early Sixties. Again the major contributors to Marine success, if not bare survival, were airpower and artillery.³⁴⁸

Combined arms problems and lack of available forces continued to plague the Marines' effort along the DMZ for the rest of the year. BUFFALO was replaced by the relatively uneventful operation HICKORY II and followed, in turn, by Operation KINGFISHER. During KINGFISHER, a combined task force based on 2/9 Marines and some armoured elements, a platoon of tanks, one of Ontos tank destroyers and three LVTE, was employed in a "spoiling raid" inside the DMZ. During the exfiltration phase, the column was ambushed several times, and the infantry and tanks proved unable to cooperate effectively.³⁴⁹ During August, ground operations were replaced by extensive shelling with increasing harassment of Marine logistical installations and movement on the part of PAVN artillery. The combat base at Con Thien attracted the majority of the shelling, but the 9th Marines regimental headquarters and major supply hub at Dong Ha were also heavily shelled. On 25 August, Dong Ha was hit by 150 rocket and artillery rounds causing the loss of several helicopters. On 3 September, the base was hit again only this time with catastrophic consequences. The ammunition storage

³⁴⁷ AAR Operation BUFFALO 1/9.

³⁴⁸ AAR Operation BUFFALO 1/9.

³⁴⁹ AAR Operation KINGFISHER 2/9 Marines, 2/9 ComC July 67; 3rd Tk Bn ComC July 67; Estes, 'Marines Under Armor', pp. 168-169.

area and the POL dump were both hit and destroyed.³⁵⁰ The attacks forced the closure of the helicopter base at Dong Ha, and, in 1968, III MAF relocated the logistic complex from Dong Ha to Quang Tri, outside PAVN artillery range. During the summer, North Vietnamese SAM batteries started to appear north of the DMZ further complicating fire support.

September witnessed an additional increase in fire attacks on Marine installations and a renewed ground offensive across the DMZ toward Con Thien. The enemy ground assault continued until the end of October and the start of the monsoon season. While the engagements were usually considered Marine victories, casualties increased. As an example, a single Marine battalion, 2/4 Marines, reported, over an average monthly strength of 1,144 effectives in September, 49 KIA, 429 WIA and 240 wounded not requiring evacuation. This was in addition to 36 non-combat losses.³⁵¹ The following month, still operating in Con Thien area, the same battalion reported another 32 KIA and 55 WIA plus 35 non evacuated wounded and 11 non-combat losses.³⁵² According to the official history, by the end of the month the 2/4 Marines was able to muster around 400 men for operational duty.³⁵³ Between September and October, the 9th Marines, reinforced up to 6 battalions, fought four major actions including

³⁵⁰ Telfer, et al, 'Fighting the North Vietnamese', p. 130

³⁵¹ 2/4 Marines ComC Sept 1967.

³⁵² 2/4 Marines ComC Oct 1967.

³⁵³ The official history reports a rifle strength of 952 on 12 September when the battalion arrived at Con Thien and a strength of 462 in October. The numbers were derived from comments made by Lt. Gen. Louis Metzger Assistant Division Commander 3rd Marine Division Telfer, et al, 'Fighting the North Vietnamese', pp. 135, 137.

one involving an estimated full enemy regiment.³⁵⁴ Patrols were scaled up to company or even battalion strength.

Enemy artillery support increased both in volume and sophistication during the period. According to USMC data, the peak was reached in September with 9,081 reported rounds. Also in this month, elements of 9th Marines witnessed enemy artillery-delivered smoke screens and even CS attacks.³⁵⁵ While Marine and Army artillery fires in support of the 3rd Marine Division were more than three times greater in volume, with a peak of 38,703 rounds in August, the raw numbers represent only part of the of the equation. Marine artillery support was largely used in unobserved missions while PAVN fires had the advantage of fixed and visible targets.³⁵⁶ The majority of Marine artillery was firing shorter range missions as they were unable to match Soviet made PAVN guns. The massive volume of Marine fires required, in turn, a massive concentration of artillery units. Marine and Army battalions amounting to 49 batteries were operating under the control of the 12th Marines, the division organic artillery regiment. Also, the necessity to provide counter-battery fire in the DMZ area further siphoned resources from the Laotian border and support from other operations in the rest of the III MAF TAOR.

With the advent of the November monsoon, activity subsided to light contacts and harassing artillery fires, with the latter receding from the peak of September,

³⁵⁴ 9th Marines ComC Sept 1967.

³⁵⁵ 9th Marines ComC Sept 1967.

³⁵⁶ In September the 9th Marines recorded 4,972 Harassment and Interdiction missions, 779 unobserved and only 981 observed fire missions. 9th Marines ComC Sept 1967.

leaving the DMZ almost quiet. The level of enemy activity receded in other areas also with the exception of the Khe Sanh area.

6.4 General Offensive General Uprising.

The same pattern of light contacts and harassing artillery strikes was repeated almost everywhere in Quang Tri and Thua Thien with the exception of the Khe Sanh area. Strategically, after two years of fighting, the situation in III MAF TAOR, especially in the two Northern provinces, had not changed significantly. At the same time, the operational outlook at the end of 1967 was completely different from the one at the end of 1965. If, at the end of 1965, the PAVN build-up around A Shau had not worried General Walt, by the end of 1967, MACV was concerned about the possibility of a general enemy offensive.³⁵⁷ In the I CTZ, the most critical area appeared to be the Khe Shan combat base and its environs. Not only could the Combat Base, for all purposes, be considered under siege but, in January 1968, a series of sharp battles along the Cua Viet River and in the vicinity of the combat bases of Cam Lo and Camp Carroll threatened the supply lines to both Khe Sanh and Con Thien. The attempt of the North Vietnamese to cut the river supply line on the Cua Viet sparked a series of battalion sized engagements to protect it. Again the Marine units were forced to rely on artillery, naval gunfire, airpower and tanks to counter the well-equipped PAVN forces operating with artillery support from positions north of the DMZ.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ MACV, 1967, p. 108.

³⁵⁸ Jack Shumlinson, Leonard Blaisol, Charles Smith & David Dawson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*, (Washington: USMC 1997), p. 32-34, 43, 115.

Despite the III MAF emphasis on pacification, the conventional threat to the DMZ became more and more central to American concerns. By the end of 1967, it had become the paramount concern. Despite two years of efforts, the I CTZ did not appear any more secure. Furthermore, even the Marines had to concede that their pacification efforts had floundered in the face of mounting enemy pressure. Conventional operations were absorbing the bulk of III MAF resources. To a certain extent, if American initiatives had certainly improved the situation in the III CTZ and stalemated the II CTZ, the situation in the I CTZ was worrisome.³⁵⁹ Until this threat was removed, pacification was a moot point. Marine officers were contesting the utility of the CAP program in areas where the threat was coming from PAVN units as well as resenting the diversion of scarce conventional combat units to protect CAP forces.

The continuing threat to Khe Sanh, enemy control of the A Shau Valley, and the constant threat of conventional actions along the DMZ forced MACV to divert troops from other regions of South Vietnam and request additional formations from the US. By late 1967, the I CTZ was the only area where Westmoreland felt the need for additional reinforcements. To satisfy this need MACV took several initiatives. More Marine formations were freed for operations along the DMZ when MACV introduced, for the first time, large Army combat units in the I CTZ. The first of these movements was the deployment of Task Force Oregon (TF Oregon), a composite, division-size formation with units drawn from the 101st Airborne Division, the 25th Infantry Division, and the 199th Light Infantry Brigade. TF Oregon was deployed in the area around Phu Bai and in the two

³⁵⁹ MACV, 1967, pp. 334-339; MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', pp. 434-436.

southernmost provinces of the I CTZ to allow the Marines to concentrate their units in the north around Da Nang, Thua Thien, and Quang Tri. The temporary deployment of TF Oregon was followed with the creation of the 23rd 'Americal' Division in the same area which grouped several previously independent light infantry brigades. Several new units coming directly from the US, such as the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, were also assigned to the Americal Division. Even more critical for the next phase of operations was the redeployment of the entire 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) from the Central Highlands in the II CTZ to the vicinity of Quang Tri. The 1st Cavalry Division was intended as the spearhead of a large effort to break the siege of Khe Sanh. A temporary corps-size formation, MACV (Forward), was activated to control the proposed operation.

By the end of January 1968, even the seemingly dire situation at Khe Sanh was overshadowed by thousands of well-equipped PAVN regular and VC attacking cities, towns and villages almost everywhere. In the III MAF TAOR, the Tet Offensive was a debacle for the communists with each main attack failing. For the I CTZ, the communist plan involved attacks on Quang Tri, Hue, and Da Nang and the continuation of the siege of Khe Sanh. The attacks on the three provincial capitals were supposed to involve a division or equivalent in each case. Yet, despite the careful preparation and the considerable forces committed, these three attacks ended in military failures. Furthermore, the political consequences of the Battle for Hue strengthened rather than weakened the RVN government. The attack on Da Nang was a complete failure; the attacking division, the 2nd PAVN Infantry Division, had been rendered combat ineffective

during the summer-autumn battles. The divisional size attack envisioned by Hanoi's planners never materialized. The battles of Hue and Quang Tri were of greater significance, and, in the case of Hue, required the investment of considerable Allied resources and time. The PAVN and the VC had pre-empted Westmoreland's offensive.

At Quang Tri City prompt action by the elite ARVN 1st Division foiled the attacks. At Da Nang the 2nd PAVN Division had been so bloodied in the Summer-Fall battles in the Que Son Valley that its attack on the city was badly planned, under strength and poorly executed.³⁶⁰ Only at Hue was the communist attack, at least initially, successful. Elements of the 324B and 325C Divisions, employing the equivalent of 14 battalions, were able to seize the city with the exception of the MACV compound and the headquarters of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division. While the commander of the 1st ARVN Division was warned of the potential risks for Hue, his forces were too spread out to be repositioned in time. Furthermore, while in Quang Tri province the ceasefire had been cancelled and both US and ARVN units exempted from it in the Thua Thien province, it was too late as more than half of the available troops had received holiday leaves.

Despite these shortcomings, prompt action by South Vietnamese and Marine units saved the two enclaves and created the basis for a prolonged but ultimately successful city fight that saw Allied forces recapturing the city by February.³⁶¹ Marine units were quickly dispatched from the base at Phu Bai to reinforce the MACV compound and secure the 'new city'. Initially, only South

³⁶⁰ Lehrack, 'Road', pp. 263-265.

³⁶¹ MACV, 1968, pp. 156-157.

Vietnamese units were employed to retake the 'old city', also called the Citadel, due to political considerations. The constant attrition due to intensive urban combat forced the ARVN officers to ask for Marine cooperation in the second phase of the battle. US Army forces from the 1st Cavalry Division were redeployed to operate in the proximity of Hue to stop the flow of PAVN reinforcements and trap enemy units that were trying to escape the city after the tide of the battle turned to the Allied favour. The battle for Hue required 10 Vietnamese (ARVN and VNMC), 3 Marine, and 4 US Army battalions supported by artillery, engineers, and armoured units.

The efforts to retake the city were complicated by several factors. The main element impacting operations inside the city was the city itself. Far from being just a collection of shacks and ramshackle buildings, Hue was in reality two different and complex entities. The New City, situated on the south of the Perfume River, was a modern city with concrete buildings housing government offices, universities, schools and apartment blocks that would not have been out of place in America or Europe. The Citadel, or Old City, nestled on the northern bank of the Perfume River was a fortress city surrounded by French designed walls built in the 19th century and designed to withstand artillery fire. Furthermore, it was dotted by inner walls, towers, temples, and churches whose sturdy construction lent them to their employment as defensive strongpoints and to the use of their bell towers as observation posts and sniper nests. The fact that Hue was the historical centre of Vietnam meant that collateral damage, especially to its imperial palace, had to be reduced to a minimum for political

considerations. This, in turn, meant that artillery, naval gunfire, and airpower were subjected to severe restrictions. While, due to the intensity of the fighting, several restrictions on artillery and naval gunfire support were removed, the weather hampered both air support and observation of targets for indirect fire.

Despite these restrictions, the political value of the city was so high that it had to be retaken even at the cost of massive combat casualties. Fighting inside the city forced the Allied troops to literally unlearn the lessons of jungle warfare and re-learn urban combat. Some strong points had to be taken by storm with the employment of assault ladders and grappling hooks like a medieval siege. On average, both public buildings in the New City and the historic buildings of the Citadel proved impervious to infantry weapons requiring artillery or tank fire to suppress their defenders. For an organization that had emphasized lightness of equipment and air mobility, the battle for Hue was a rude shock. Of particular importance at the tactical level was, again, the lack of proper combined arms training involving infantry and tanks. Only through the proper use of tank-infantry teams were the infantry companies able to advance in the city. Yet tanks proved once again that, if not protected by infantry, they were vulnerable in urban areas to infantry weapons ranging from rocket propelled grenades (the ubiquitous Soviet made RPG-7) to large calibre recoilless rifles. M48 Patton tanks were in short supply, and the M50 Ontos tank destroyers had to be used despite their lack of armour. While the six 106mm recoilless guns mounted on each M50 were effective the vehicles were only lightly armoured and the crew had to dismount to reload the guns.

At the operational level, the battle cast serious doubts on the overall focus of the III MAF strategy. In Thua Thien province, the main threat during the Tet Offensive was represented by PAVN conventional forces that had infiltrated from Laos through the A Shau Valley rather than the local forces that had represented the focus of the III MAF pacification strategy. General Walt's decision to not seal or retake the A Shau Valley and, instead, prioritize the coastal lowlands had come back to haunt his successor, General Cushman. The only promising element emerging from Hue was the response of the South Vietnamese soldiers and population to the offensive. The temporary communist occupation of Hue witnessed mass murders and class cleansing throughout the city by armed communist elements that, in turn, sparked a massive backlash in the South Vietnamese population. Even with this 'beneficial' return the Battle for Hue required 10 ARVN and VNMC, 3 Marine, and 4 Army battalions. Casualties were high, and collateral damage to the historic city was extensive, even if the Imperial Palace had been spared destruction. Approximately 4,000 confirmed civilian deaths were recorded. Of these only around 1,200 were attributed to the effect of the urban battle; the remaining 3,000 being nothing less than the result of mass murders perpetrated by the PAVN and the VC.³⁶²

Not only had the III MAF failed to appreciate the threat to the city, but its pacification campaign had not provided any solution to the problem caused by enemy main forces to the civilian population they were supposed to protect. The Battle of Hue also revealed several operational shortcomings in the nature of the

³⁶² Villard, 'Tet Offensive', p. 81; CMIC no. 6027448568, 29 May 68, sub: Attack on Hue City, pp. 6, 9; CDEC Bulletin no. 11791, 26 Apr 68, p. 2. box 154, Country Files Vietnam (CFVN), LBJ Library.

III MAF. While local units stationed at Phu Bai had been able to intervene quickly, additional reinforcements lacked mobility. In the I CTZ only the 1st Cavalry Division had been able to act as a fire brigade, rapidly redeploying to threatened areas due to its massive organic helicopter component. Despite their initial lead on air mobility and the massive expenses in helicopter development, the Marines had been unable to produce a real tactically and operationally viable air mobility doctrine.

At Quang Tri the PAVN attacks were repulsed with less difficulty. Only one reinforced PAVN regiment with five controlled battalions had been assigned the mission to capture the city, and the South Vietnamese defenders were on full alert. Thanks to local intelligence sources and prisoners' interrogation, the local ARVN regimental commander had been able to prepare his defences. Furthermore one of the elite battalions of the Airborne Division (the 9th Airborne Battalion) had been assigned to the 1st Regiment, 1st Infantry ARVN Division to reinforce it. The continued combat along the DMZ had also prompted the local ARVN and Marine commanders to disregard the ceasefire. The commander of the 3rd Marine Division, General Rathvon Tomkins, remembered a phone call from General Cushman 'that exempted the 3d MarDiv . . . from any such foolishness. It was to be "business as usual" for northern I Corps.'³⁶³ Yet despite Tomkins' and Cushman's prescience, only one Marine battalion was available in the vicinity of Quang Tri, and it was assigned to defend the local airport. The bulk of the 3rd Marine Division was tied up in the defence of the DMZ. Fortunately, the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, with four airmobile infantry battalions, was

³⁶³ Shumlinson et al, 'Defining Year', p. 131

positioned near the city in preparation for a move toward Khe Sanh. On 31 January, with the PAVN 812th Regiment attacking the city, ARVN officers and US Advisors requested the commitment of the 1st Cavalry to the battle. Immediately, two battalions, 1-5 and 1-12 Cavalry, were assault landed by helicopter east of the city astride the PAVN axis of attack. The ability of the cavalry troopers to practically land on top of the support weapons of the 812th Regiment in short notice surprised the PAVN troops. From being the attackers surrounding Quang Tri, the PAVN found themselves entrapped between the stubborn ARVN troops in the city and the attacking cavalrymen. By the morning of 1 February, the 812th Regiment had scattered into small groups and was in full withdrawal.³⁶⁴ The rapid commitment of US forces had saved the city mainly due to the US Army's ability to quickly move large formations into combat. The massive scale of helicopter support had proven decisive.³⁶⁵

The 1st Cavalry Division also played a critical role in the Battle of Hue. While it was not involved in the fighting for the city proper, it operated astride the main PAVN supply routes engaging forces that were supposed to reinforce the regiments in the city itself. While the operation was not without problems, the mobility of the 1st Cavalry was instrumental in retaking the city. The availability of extensive helicopter resources not only allowed the 1st Cavalry to respond quickly to the enemy attack but also kept isolated units supplied and combat effective as in the case of the 2-12th Cavalry at Nha Nanh Hill. In that occasion one battalion from the 1st Cavalry division was heli-lifted astride the PAVN main

³⁶⁴ Combat After Action Report, Operation QUANG TRI, 14th Military History Detachment, 1st Cavalry Division Period 31 Jan-6 Feb 1968, RG 472 NARA. Hereafter Operation QUANG TRI.

³⁶⁵ Operation QUANG TRI, p.5-6

supply route to Hue. The unit was quickly surrounded but was able to hold the hill and interdict the PAVN supply line thanks to continuous helicopter resupply.³⁶⁶ In addition to their role as assault transports, the helicopters provided additional reconnaissance capability and fire support. Again firepower proved decisive in staving off the PAVN conventional forces. Not only organic and direct support assets but also 7th Fleet destroyers and cruisers intervened several times in support of ground forces. Despite the lingering debate on the true nature of the Tet Offensive, the battles around Hue and in the Quang Tri province were markedly conventional for both sides.

6.5 Counterattack

After the conclusion of the Tet Offensive, MACV started to press again for offensive operations. As early as 25 January 1968, even before the Tet onslaught, General Westmoreland had expressed his determination to reopen Route 9 by force. To this aim he had moved the 1st Cavalry Division into Quang Tri as has been previously mentioned. He had also requested an additional brigade as reinforcements to be used along the DMZ, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). Westmoreland also reshaped the command structure in the I CTZ. In February he sent his deputy, General Creighton Abrams, to Phu Bai to establish a new command entity called 'MACV (forward)' to control all activities in the I CTZ.³⁶⁷ Abrams' arrival was not welcomed by several Marine officers who

³⁶⁶ Villard, 'Tet Offensive', pp. 52-53, Kronh, 'Lost Battalion', 1993, p. 100

³⁶⁷ Creighton William Abrams Jr (1914-1974) is a sort of legend in the US Army, the M1 Abrams tank being named in his honour. He graduated from West Point in 1936 and served in the 1st Cavalry Division from 1936 to 1940. In 1940 he transferred to the Armor Branch. He commanded the 37th Tank Battalion of the 4th Armored Division between 1943 and 1945. He led the battalion

saw the move as a demonstration of the lack of confidence in the ability of III MAF to handle the situation on the part of MACV.³⁶⁸ On the other hand the creation of MACV (Forward) could have tested on different reasons. Westmoreland had previously expressed doubts on the ability of III MAF to effectively control the entire I CTZ due to the dispersed nature of its forces. MACV had also often shown concerns for the safety of Hue. Furthermore, Westmoreland had also been clear in his decision to have a major battle in the I CTZ in discussion with General Wheeler, the chairman of the JCS, in December 1967.³⁶⁹

Sending Abrams north in February, only days after having redeployed the 1st Cavalry Division near Quang Tri, was a logical move, especially if, as it will be discussed later, Westmoreland's plans included a corps-sized offensive with a possible incursion into Laos. On 17 December, Westmoreland further clarified his intentions by announcing his decision to move the 101st Airborne Division, the only other fully airmobile unit in Vietnam, also into the northern I CTZ and create a corps-sized formation labelled Provisional Corps Vietnam. The prospective commander of this new formation was General William Rosson, the original commander of Task Force Oregon and then current commander of the I Field

in the battle of Arracourt and in the relief of Bastogne. He served in Korea, and commanded the V Corps in Germany in 1962-63. He was appointed Deputy Commander MACV in May 1967 and Commander MACV in June 1968. He was named chief of Staff of the US Army in 1972. He died while serving in that post in 1974.

³⁶⁸ Shumlinson, et al, 'Defining Year', p. 238; MajGen Raymond L. Murray intvw, 1975, p. 58, Oral HistColl, Hist&MusDiv HQMC, p. 58; MajGen Rathvon McC Tompkins intvw, 1973, pp. 82-4, Oral HistColl, Hist&MusDiv HQMC.

³⁶⁹ MSG Westmoreland to Wheeler, December 10 1967, MAC 11956, Westmoreland Papers Box 15; Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, CMH, Comments on draft, dtd 23Nov94, Vietnam Comment File.

Force Vietnam.³⁷⁰ Rosson's command would include both Army divisions and the 3rd Marine Division and, differently from MACV (Forward), he would have been officially subordinate to III MAF. Rosson had earned the praise of III MAF while commanding TF Oregon, and his appointment could be seen as a way to ease tensions between MACV and III MAF.

Whatever the reasons for Westmoreland's command decision, it not only strengthened the forces in Quang Tri just before the start of the Tet Offensive, but it also created a sufficient manoeuvre mass to allow the Allied troops to exploit the aftermath of the enemy offensive and the massive casualties that the PAVN and local NLF forces suffered in their all-out attacks on Hue and Quang Tri. While the ongoing battle for Hue tied down the 1st Marine Division, elements of the 1st Cavalry Division, and considerable ARVN forces until the end of February, other unengaged units were able to launch limited offensive operations. The concept of operations outlined by Generals Abrams and Cushman was to launch a series of limited offensives in the coastal plains to complete the destruction of local forces. After this initial action a massive push toward Khe Sanh Combat Base would have followed. Finally, a major operation from Khe Shan south toward the A Shau Valley was planned, making the whole series of operations the first real offensive conducted by the III MAF from the start of the war. This concept and its further refinements were based on the assumption that the overall situation in the I CTZ would not have changed for both sides. The

³⁷⁰ William B. Rosson (1918-2004); he served in World War Two in Europe seeing combat in North Africa, Sicily, Anzio, France and Germany. During his tenure as commander of Task Force Oregon he was able to establish very good relationship with the III MAF.

planners also assumed one of the two airmobile divisions would have been withdrawn by September 1968.³⁷¹

Concurrently to the planning for offensive operations, Westmoreland directed III MAF to re-examine the DYE MARKER operations and the barrier concept without being 'constrained by past policies or precedents.'³⁷² In a complete reversal of the III MAF stance on the DMZ, the officer responsible for this analysis, Brigadier General Hoffman, the operations officer of III MAF, defined the nature of the threat along the DMZ as 'invasion' as opposed to simple infiltration.³⁷³ In light of increased infantry attacks and artillery barrages, the report advised the indefinite postponement of the completion of the McNamara Line. Apparently also included in the original concept of operations for the northern half of the I CTZ was the extension of operations into Laos. Just before the official start date of Operation PEGASUS, the 'relief' of Khe Sanh, the Operations Officer of the 1st Cavalry Division briefed the division commander, General Tolson, of follow-on actions after the completion of an overland link with the combat base. The operation included an advance into Laos by a reinforced 1st Cavalry Division and a subsequent assault in the A Shau Valley from the west toward the coast. General Tolson ordered the concept scrapped in light of President Johnson's decision to announce a bombing halt over North Vietnam.³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ III MAP Staff Study, Subj : Military Posture, Northern I Corps, 1 Sep 1968, dtd 31Mar68, p . 1, III MAF Miscellaneous Documents, USMC History Collection

³⁷² ComUSMACV msg to CMC, dtd 13Mar68, III MAF Incoming Msgs , 5—14 Mar68, USMC History Collection.

³⁷³ III MAF Staff Study, Subj : Military Posture, Northern I Corps, 1 Sep 1968, dtd 31Mar68, p. 1 III MAF Miscellaneous Documents, USMC History Collection.

³⁷⁴ Clarke, 'Warriors', p. 153

While the planners were debating on PEGASUS and its follow-on operation, the Allied forces launched a series of joint offensives in the coastal lowlands designed to capitalize both on the weakness of their communist opponents and on the added mobility afforded by the 1st Cavalry Division and its organic helicopter component. In a series of sharp engagements, Army, Marine, and South Vietnamese forces cleared the surroundings of Quang Tri and Hue and hit hard the PAVN concentrations along the Cua Viet River. The actions along the Cua Viet were, in part, a response to increased communist activity there in late February and March, and, in part, required to secure the eastern part of the DMZ before the launch of PEGASUS which was scheduled for early April.

These actions peaked on 18 March when three Marine companies were stopped in front of the abandoned hamlet of Mai Xa Thi (West) by PAVN infantry supported by heavy artillery fire from north of the DMZ. The Marines were able to take the hamlet only after bringing in their own artillery and air support. The 18 March engagement was just the last one in a series of battalion sized engagements along the DMZ during March.³⁷⁵

By early April the situation in the northern I CTZ had improved to the point that General Cushman argued that the Allies had regained the 'countryside by default' owing to a lack of communist resistance.³⁷⁶ In March and early April, numerical gains in the I CTZ were impressive both in enemy casualties and in number of villages and civilians put under government control.³⁷⁷ More importantly than

³⁷⁵ Shumlinson, et al, 'Defining Year', pp. 243-246.

³⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 246.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 250.

body and head counts was the fact that operations reported only limited contact with the enemy inside the coastal lowlands. The lack of enemy resistance allowed the Allies to push deeper into the country and divert combat units to pacification missions like the re-opening of roads.

Still, the first and foremost priority was the relief of the 26th Marine Regiment defending Khe Sanh. During February and March the siege had, contrary to some accounts, intensified. On 6 February a ground assault supported by tanks overran the Special Forces/CIDG camp at Lang Vei. Additional PAVN artillery, including 130mm guns, had been moved in range of the base during February. More ominously, trenches were dug in toward the combat base in February and March. The orthodox account states that Khe Sanh was never directly attacked. Yet in two cases the perimeter was directly engaged. On 26 February, a two-squad Marine patrol outside the base was engaged in a fierce fire fight with PAVN troops occupying trenches close to the base. Even before that patrol, on 13 February, Westmoreland had asked Admiral Sharp at CINCPAC to revise the restriction placed on B-52 tactical strikes and to authorize raids inside a 1,400 meters radius from friendly troops. CINCPAC authorized the change five days later. A test mission called Khe Sanh 207 Red was performed at 1,200 meters from the Marine position on one of the outlying outposts, Hill 881S. While the mission results were not assessed by ground patrols the main purpose of the strike was to test the feasibility of using B-52 strikes in close proximity of American positions.

By the end of February, electronic intelligence pointed to an increase in traffic between Laos and the area around Khe Sanh. As Prados describes, on 29 February the MUSCLE SHOALS electronic sensors seeded all around Khe Sanh to monitor enemy movements 'all lighted up.'³⁷⁸ The base commander, Colonel Lownds, 'called up Division and...said, "I need a B-52 strike NOW; any later than two hours from now, forget it because he's going to have closed with me."³⁷⁹ B-52s already in flight were diverted to Khe Sanh and hit suspected troop concentrations. Secondary explosions were reported, and Marines in the combat base maintained seeing bodies flying in the air. A desultory ground attack hit the part of the perimeter held by the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion. The South Vietnamese soldiers reported seven enemy killed during the night, but, in the morning, additional bodies were discovered outside the barbed wire with assault ladders and Bangalore torpedoes. This was a clear sign that an attempt to breach the perimeter had been made.

A further confirmation that the 29 February 'event' was something serious came from the intelligence personnel assigned to the MACV SOG compound at Khe Sanh, FOB-3.³⁸⁰ Intelligence personnel at FOB-3 were monitoring all PAVN radio channels and maintain that PAVN transmission were regularly decoded. The PAVN was not security conscious in regards to radio communications, and US signal intelligence efforts in Vietnam were quite effective. PAVN artillery

³⁷⁸ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 407.

³⁷⁹ David Lownds, Marine Debriefing, tape no. 3139, quoted in Prados, 'Valley', p. 409.

³⁸⁰ MACV SOG (Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group) was a highly secretive organization assigned to conduct clandestine raid in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and to gather human intelligence in the border areas, usually through the employment of small reconnaissance teams staffed by US Special Forces personnel and local soldiers drawn from ethnic minorities.

batteries around Khe Sanh fired by radio commands, and FOB-3 was usually able to warn the base of incoming artillery fire in advance. Concerning the 29 February attack, Staff Sergeant Harve Saal, one of the intelligence analysts at FOB-3, maintains that they had intercepted and decrypted a detailed radio message about an impending PAVN attack including mention of specific coloured flares for a cease fire/retreat signal. FOB-3 personnel used these flared during the 29 February night.³⁸¹

Another attack was launched on the night of 22 March. At 6:30pm on 22 March, the PAVN artillery started an intensive barrage over the base with 642 shells impacting before midnight along with another 534 between midnight and 6am on the 23. Again the MUSCLE SHOALS sensors lighted up and Colonel Lownds requested emergency B-52 strikes. 24 of the big bombers (four strikes of six bombers each) were already en route to other targets in South Vietnam and were diverted over Khe Sanh. In addition Marine gunners from the base itself and army gunners from the supporting fire bases at The Rockpile and Camp Carroll fired 2,042 rounds. While no attack materialized, General Abrams told General Wheeler that there was some evidence that the attack was broken up by the fire support before it was effectively launched. A further confirmation is contained in a captured notebook by a PAVN soldier. His last entry, dated 23 March 1968, read 'A day full of bitter hardships and bloodshed.'³⁸²

As much as the siege of Khe Sanh had distracted the Allied commanders from Hue and Quang Tri, or from the rest of South Vietnam, it had also been a costly

³⁸¹ Harve Saal Interview by Stubbe May 20, 1989 quoted in Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 410.

³⁸² MACV J-2, CDEC, Bulletin 11,357 April 11, 1968, CFVN box 155, Folder Khe Sanh, LBJ Library.

affair for the PAVN. While, including the relief operation, only around 1,600 enemy killed had been officially recorded, post-war American assessments indicated that between 10,000 and 15,000 PAVN troops were killed in the battle. These statements are in line with both captured documents and post-war comments by North Vietnamese officers. In early March, the 1st Battalion, 9th Regiment, 304th division reported a strength of 554 soldiers on its rolls. Of these 554 soldiers only 283 were available, 64 were dead, 83 wounded, and 85 more had deserted; another 61 deserters were recorded few days later.³⁸³

Against this background, the assault to reopen the overland route to Khe Sanh had been in its detailed planning stage from 10 March. The operation, named PEGASUS in reference to the Greek winged horse and representing the large scale employment of airmobile assets, was the largest and most complex action in the I CTZ to date. The operation involved the full 1st Cavalry Division, the 1st Marine Regiment, the 26th Marine Regiment at Khe Sanh (with the 1-9 Marines attached), the 3rd ARVN Airborne Task Force (made up of three battalions from the Elite Division) and supporting assets for an approximate total of 30,000 men. Massive tactical air support from USMC and USAF resources was assigned to the operations as were several B-52 ARCLIGHT strikes. The entire force would have been commanded by General Tolson and his 1st Cavalry Headquarters. The assault plan involved a series of airmobile assaults on both sides of Route 9 by the Air Cavalry while the 1st Marine Regiment would have followed the road protecting the engineers of the 11th Engineer Battalion that was to repair the

³⁸³ MACV J-2, CDEC, Bulletin 11,456 April 16, 1968, Johnson papers, CVFN box 115, folder Khe Sanh, LBJ Library.

road up to the Combat Base and, if further operations were approved, to the Laotian border and beyond.

The offensive started on schedule on 1 April. The Airmobile part was delayed by adverse weather, a constant in the following days, but the 1st Marine Regiment kicked off at 7:00am with two rifle battalions on both sides of the road and the 11th Engineers (attached) along the road itself. At midday, after the weather improved, the helicopters started to lift the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division and its three organic battalions into two landing zones far in advance of the 1st Marines. Enemy contacts were few, but the US troops started to uncover large supply caches. On 3 April, General Tolson committed his 2nd Brigade, and, on the same day, the first serious contact with PAVN units occurred in the vicinity of LZ Thor and involved the 2/7 Cavalry. On the following day, contacts intensified. The 1/5 Cavalry encountered an enemy battalion nestled in an abandoned French fort, a post-1945 concrete construction that, according to reports, looked much older and decrepit than its real age, south of the combat base. The American battalion lost its commander, had to be replaced by 2/5 Cavalry, and the position held until 7 April. This battle was the most significant contact of the entire PEGASUS operation.

The 26th Marines started to launch a series of 'breakout' attacks from Khe Sanh on the same day, 4 April. An earlier probe from the combat base had been launched on 30 March, one day before PEGASUS, and it involved a company attack near a feature called Hill 471 to recover the lost bodies from the 26 February patrol. The assault company B Company, 1/26 Marines, ended up in a

four hour long fire fight with entrenched PAVN troops. The 4 April attack was a battalion assault on Hill 471 by the 1/9 Marines. The hill was taken in the early afternoon, but the PAVN subjected it to an intensive artillery barrage and, around 3:30am on 5 April, launched a battalion-sized counterattack to retake it. The counterattack was repulsed with 148 confirmed enemy casualties. On the following day, 6 April, troopers from the 1st Cavalry Division joined hands with the Marines on Hill 471. Other engagements were fought on 6 and 8 April, both by Cavalry troopers and ARVN paratroopers against battalion sized enemy forces.

PEGASUS started to fizzle around 9 April. Elements of the 2/26 Marines had been engaged in the vicinity of Hill 557 from 5 April. What started as a reconnaissance in force developed into a full scale battle for the control of the hill. PAVN defenders held the position until 9 April when they simply vanished. By that date PAVN troops stopped actively contesting Allied moves and, instead, appeared to be withdrawing toward Laos. There had always been a debate between the US commanders on the extent of PEGASUS, General Rosson, with Tolson's concurrence, wanted to keep it brief, around two weeks, and instead focus on an assault in the A Shau Valley. Westmoreland wanted to have an open-ended operation and was uncommitted on the exact duration. By 12 April, when the 1st Cavalry reoccupied the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp, Rosson, now in control of all US forces in Quang Tri and Thua Thien, again asked permission to shut down PEGASUS and move into the A Shau. By 17 April Westmoreland concurred, and PEGASUS was officially terminated. In the end, instead of the expected climactic

battle, the relief of Khe Sanh passed off uneventfully with only relatively minor actions.³⁸⁴

PEGASUS' official results included 1,304 PAVN KIA, 21 PAVN prisoners, 17 vehicles, including PT-76 light tanks, destroyed and 207 heavy weapons captured. 13,890 tons of supplies, 13,626 tons of which was food, were captured. The operation had been costly with a final casualty list of 51 Marines KIA and 459 WIA, 41 Army KIA, 207 WIA and 5 missing, 33 ARVN KIA and 187 WIA. Yet the two identified PAVN divisions in the area, 304th and 324B, had been forced to retreat to Laos in tatters. At least one author has used the results of PEGASUS to show that the role of Khe Sanh as a plug on Route 9 had been unsuccessful by pointing out how much material the PAVN had been able to move anyway into the area.³⁸⁵ Yet the fact remains that these supplies had been used to support the siege of the base. Even if the entire siege had been conceived only as a diversion, a single reinforced Marine regiment had fixed two, if not three, PAVN divisions and forced them to endure concentrated and unrestricted Allied firepower for months. The attacks on Quang Tri had been conducted by units already operating in the city and moved directly across the DMZ rather than coming from Laos. Holding Khe Sanh appears to have been a sound decision.

With the departure of the 1st Cavalry division from Khe Sanh, a new Marine operation SCOTLAND II, was launched to keep the initiative in the area. SCOTLAND II also allowed a re-opening of the debate on the utility of holding the combat base. Despite Westmoreland's intentions to hold the base, at least until

³⁸⁴ Shumlinson, et al, 'Defining Year', pp. 283-287.

³⁸⁵ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', p. 431.

after the monsoon, new orders came from Washington, and the base was closed in June 1968 by the new MACV commander, General Creighton Abrams.³⁸⁶ While there is no hard evidence on the decision making process over the withdrawal from Khe Sanh, Prados' argument, namely representing a decision imposed from the President on Abrams is sound. Also sound is his argument that MACV's previous insistence on holding the base was due to its utility as a jumping off point for an operation into Laos.³⁸⁷ Further supporting the latter contention is the fact that both during Operation REMAGEN, an armoured raid along the Laotian border, and during the ARVN assault into Laos in 1971, Khe Sanh was indeed reoccupied. Yet abandoning Khe Sanh in June 1968 also meant that the PAVN was able to rebuild its forces along the border. After PEGASUS, PAVN forces in the Khe Sanh area were reported as the equivalent of 12 battalions. This total did not change significantly during SCOTLAND II. This concentration of forces suggests that Hanoi was interested in forcing open Route 9, and control of the border areas was, indeed, an important element in the communist strategy. As a consequence, a smaller base, Combat Base Vandergrift, had to be opened further east along Route 9 to continue to support MACV SOG operations into Laos as well as hold the western flank of the DMZ.

6.6 Back into the A Shau, first try.

One of the reasons behind closing down PEGASUS as fast as possible was the determination of Tolson and Rosson, with Cushman's concurrence, to clear the A Shau Valley as soon as possible. It was not just the three generals on the spot

³⁸⁶ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', pp. 418, 448.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 448.

that were worried with the A Shau. Westmoreland had always been concerned by this area after the fall of the Special Forces Camp located there in 1966. While the A Shau had always been a concern for MACV, it was only in the spring of 1968 that Westmoreland had available troops in the I CTZ to re-enter the Valley. Not only had he the resources, but, after the bloody battle for Hue, it was a necessity. The bulk of the PAVN troops that had stormed the imperial capital came from Laos and had journeyed through the A Shau. A repetition of the Hue nightmare would have been a disaster of strategic proportions. III MAF had shelled the area in 1967, but the results were inconclusive. Furthermore, the Marines lacked both the will and resources to mount a major operation there. The only way to supply a large force there would have been by air, and a staff study admitted that a Marine operation in the A Shau would have required the entire III MAF helicopter fleet.³⁸⁸ The same was not true for the 1st Cavalry. The troopers had organic helicopters sufficient for the mission. The die was cast for the first large-scale foray of US troops into the Valley, Operation DELAWARE.

The first elements of the division, the helicopter scouts of the 1/9 Cavalry, entered the A Shau on 14 April. From the start DELAWARE ran into problems. The PAVN antiaircraft defences were incredibly strong in the area. It was not so much a question of finding them but of surviving their fire. The scouts reported not only heavy machine guns but, for the first time in South Vietnam, large concentrations of Soviet made 37mm guns.³⁸⁹ In reply, the Valley was subjected

³⁸⁸ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 38

³⁸⁹ The Soviet M1939 (K-61) 37mm automatic air defence gun was an unlicensed modification of the original Bofors 25mm AAA gun with an effective antiaircraft range of 3,000 meters and a

to intensive air strikes. B-52s flew around 200 sorties supported by another 300 from Air Force and Marine fighters and fighter-bombers. On 19 April, DELAWARE kicked off with the 1-7 Cavalry assaulting in the Valley near the abandoned village and air strip at A Loui. The air assault was costly with ten helicopters shot down and 27 more damaged. PAVN gunners had waited until the first waves had landed and the unit was committed and then targeted the reinforcements. The 5-7 Cavalry experienced the same reception. By the end of the day, both battalions were in heavy contact. However, the 5-7 managed to clear a landing area for heavier loads, and artillery was brought in improving the situation. The following day the two battalions pushed toward PAVN positions on the Valley floor, both toward the airstrip at A Loui and along the old Route 548 toward Laos against strong resistance. PAVN troops were solidly entrenched on the heights surrounding the Valley. Even worse, on 20 April the weather turned sour. First, the Valley was blanketed by fog, and, second, an unseasonal monsoon-like rain hit. DELAWARE was practically stopped in a sea of mud. The 1/7 continued its push toward A Loui, but progress was slow. Then the weather improved again on 22 April allowing Tolson to send a battalion from the 3rd Brigade to a landing zone near A Loui to support the effort of the 5/7 to take the place. A Loui was taken on 25 April, but further operations were again hampered by weather on the 27th. On the 26th, a USAF C-130 airdropping supplies to A Loui was shot down. Even if the airstrip was reopened in early May, DELAWARE was practically closed down on 11 May when the bulk of Allied troops, two brigades of the 1st Cavalry and an ARVN Airborne Task Force, were withdrawn from the Valley due to the

sustained rate of fire of around 80 rounds per minute. It was a very effective anti-aircraft weapons against low flying aircrafts and helicopters.

constraints imposed by the weather on air missions. The operation was officially terminated on 17 May.

While DELAWARE did not produce the massive battle that Tolson expected, its results were nonetheless significant. In 27 days the Allied troops stopped movement in the Valley toward the lowlands and captured or destroyed huge amounts of supplies, heavy weapons, including at least one PT-76 tank and 866 122mm artillery rounds, and destroyed or captured over 70 trucks.³⁹⁰ Casualties on both sides were relatively heavy, with the Allies having lost 168 KIA and 30 MIA and the PAVN a confirmed 869 KIA and 8 prisoners. Even more staggering is the amount of helicopter losses on the US side, 20 of them destroyed outright, and the amount of support required: 2,966 aircraft sorties, including 442 B-52 sorties. As impressive as the numbers were, the A Shau was, still, in the words of General Cushman, an enemy supply highway.³⁹¹ Even after the departure of General Westmoreland from Saigon on 11 June 1968, the A Shau remained a top priority for MACV. The new commander, General Abrams, ordered a new incursion there in July 1968, Operation SOMERSET PLAINS. This time the 101st Airborne Division, with ARVN troops in support, led the way. SOMERSET PLAIN was launched on 4 August and terminated on 19 August. It was an uneventful operation. The Allied troops scrounged the Valley floor for around two weeks with meagre results; the weather rather than enemy resistance being the main obstacle. Only 133 enemy KIA were reported, and the total of supplies recovered was insignificant compared to DELAWARE. According to a village party secretary

³⁹⁰ USAF Project CHECO Opn Delaware 19 Apr-17 May 1968, 2 Sept. 1968, p. 50, Folder 01, Bud Harton Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

³⁹¹ Shumlinson, et al, 'Defining Year' p. 253.

that defected, July 1968 was supposed to be a month of relative quiet to prepare for a decisive battle in August, and other intelligence sources point to severe food shortages in July and August.³⁹²

6.7 Defending the DMZ, Round Three

The late summer of 1968 saw a renewed series of battles along the eastern DMZ.

While there is no indication of the exact intention behind these attacks, they coincided with a series of Allied offensives in the NLF/PAVN base areas around Hue. They thus can be construed as an attempt to distract Allied forces from their post-Tet counteroffensive aimed at extending the South Vietnamese government control of the countryside. The PAVN efforts were matched by the American and South Vietnamese forces that launched their own offensive operations along the DMZ. The withdrawal from Khe Sanh in June and the presence of two Army airmobile divisions in the I CTZ allowed the new commander of the 3rd Marine Division, Major General Raymond W. Davis, to concentrate his forces along the eastern portion of the DMZ and intensify his efforts there. Facing the reinforced 3rd Marine Division were 36 enemy battalions from the 304th, 308th, and 320th Divisions and assorted independent units. The situation was one of apparent balance. While the US troops had better mobility and could rely on an astounding quantity of firepower, the PAVN was still holding the tactical initiative against what amounted to a fixed defensive line and enjoyed the support from their artillery stationed in North Vietnam; artillery that, even if less accurate and flexible than its Allied

³⁹² MACV, 1968, p. 161.

counterparts, was longer ranged and practically immune from counter-battery fires. In May, the 3rd Marine Division launched a series of mobile operations long Route 9 and from Khe Sanh toward the Laotian border. The new operations displayed a marked contrast with previous USMC actions. General Davis, fresh from his assignment as Deputy Commander Provisional Corps Vietnam, decided that the Marines had to conform to US Army methods. Instead of setting up fixed bases and being tied down providing static security, Marine battalions and regiments would have to operate directly against enemy troop concentrations and 'forgot about the real estate.'³⁹³

The new tactics depended on the ability to insert, usually by helicopter, the troops close to their objectives, resupply them, provide for supporting fires, and then safely withdraw them. Davis' new approach depended on the availability of helicopters in sufficient quantity not only to transport the infantry but also to quickly move howitzers and engineers to create artillery fire bases. General Davis was helped in implementing his new concept of operations by the introduction into Vietnam of the CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter and its new, and more powerful, engine. The new CH-46Es were not only more reliable than the older CH-46Ds and UH-34s, but they were faster and capable of carrying heavier loads in the difficult flying conditions in Vietnam. The new helicopters granted Davis his required mobility even if the General was always in conflict with Marine Air officers due to his habit of siphoning off helicopters to support his operations. Another important step undertaken by the new division commander was a wholesale reorganization of the infantry battalions. He insisted on having

³⁹³ MajGen Raymond G. Davis intvw, 2Feb77, p. 17, Oral HistColl, MCHC.

battalions operating under their parent regiments rather than simply shifted at a whim to temporary headquarters. While this practice, a legacy from the *ad hoc* approach of Walt's tenure as III MAF commander, allowed the creation of task forces tailored to every situation, it had also created havoc on command, control, re-supply, support, and more importantly, unit cohesion. Battalions felt they 'were commanded by strangers.'³⁹⁴ Davis made the reconstitution of unit integrity one of his main priorities.

The new battle for the DMZ started in May with the 3rd Division's offensive against troops from the PAVN 304th and 308th Divisions that had positioned themselves between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu. According to the USMC official history, the PAVN units were unprepared for the new tempo of operations and suffered accordingly.³⁹⁵ Yet these operations represent a dramatic shift in the way III MAF was waging its war. They reflect the Army procedures developed in the other Corps Tactical Zones, and, even more importantly, a growing concern on enemy main force units rather than on static pacification as the primary focus of the efforts of III MAF. Pacification operations did not cease. Actually, there was a greater countrywide emphasis on population control and security, but enemy large units were considered the primary threat to pacification.³⁹⁶ The PAVN troops were decisively defeated and the 308th Division was, temporarily, removed from the enemy order of battle by US intelligence. Still this was only the first round of the new summer battle for the DMZ.

³⁹⁴ Gen Robert H. Barrow intvw, 30Jan87 Oral HistColl, USMC History Division.

³⁹⁵ Shumlinson, et al, 'Defining Year', p. 355

³⁹⁶ Smith, 'High Mobility', p. 275; Col George C. Knapp intvw, 2May69, No. 4088 OralHistColl, USMC History Division.

In June, after Operation ROBIN, Khe Sanh was finally closed, but this event did not represent a great change in MACV priorities. In the official press statement about the base closure, MACV officers maintained that:

Friendly forces must make maximum use of their superior fire power and mobility. Mobile forces, tied to no specific terrain, must be used to the utmost to attack, intercept, reinforce or take whatever action is most appropriate to meet the increased enemy threats. Therefore, we have decided to continue the mobile posture adopted in western Quang Tri Province with Operation Pegasus in April. This decision makes the operation of the base at Khe Sanh unnecessary.³⁹⁷

With the clear lack of interest in Washington for a raid into Laos, Khe Sanh had lost its utility, yet Route 9 still had to be blocked and without great fanfare a new base was established near Ca Lu, few kilometres east of Khe Sanh, with the same purpose of Khe Sanh itself. From this new base, named Vandergrift Combat Base, the Marines continued operations in the Khe Sanh plateau until the withdrawal of the 3rd Marine Division in December 1969. Operations there were still hotly contested by PAVN units but yielded effective results, especially in terms of captured equipment and supplies. Furthermore, Marine operations in the Khe Sanh area interrupted the construction of two new enemy supply roads from Laos.

In June several battalion and regimental sized operations were conducted in the central and eastern portion of the DMZ, but enemy contacts were few and far

³⁹⁷ Shumlinson, 'Defining Year', p. 356.

between. The enemy that until March had been extremely active in the same area was avoiding contact. As much as this was a reflection of the losses incurred in the previous battles and as much as it was a planned pause for the imminent August offensive was unclear, but it is worth noting that no offensive in the Quang Tri province occurred until late August. This pause allowed the 3rd Marine Division and Provisional Corps Vietnam to launch their own assault against the PAVN position north of the DMZ, Operation THOR.

While permission for ground operations north of the DMZ had been requested by Westmoreland several times, President Johnson had never demurred on his assessment that such operations would have been politically too risky. Yet the PAVN artillery positioned north of the DMZ had been an important factor in several of the border battles in 1967 and early 1968. In March 1968 General Rathvon Tomkins suggested the idea of an attack by fire on the hub of PAVN artillery positions located at Cap Mui Lay. This area was a sort of fortress with mutually supporting artillery, antiaircraft, SAM, and coastal gun positions that had eluded destruction for several months. Antiaircraft defences prevented reconnaissance planes or helicopters from spotting for artillery or naval gunfire. Coastal guns prevented US ships from closing to effective bombardment range. Finally, artillery batteries were creating havoc on Con Thien, Dong Ha and the other positions along the DMZ. General Tomkins had suggested the use of airstrikes, artillery bombardment, and naval gunfire simultaneously to reduce

the threat.³⁹⁸ The operation was supposed to be a joint Army, Air Force, Marine, and Navy endeavour.

General Rosson, in command of the Provisional Corps Vietnam, backed the Marines despite being worried about the difficulties in an inter-service operation. MACV concurred with Rosson, supporting the plan at the end of April, and naming it Operation THOR. In May the threat posed by PAVN artillery on the eastern DMZ reached critical proportions. The 320th PAVN Division repeatedly attacked Dong Ha in division strength, and on 24 May a US Navy destroyer was hit by coastal batteries while providing fire support to ground forces. On the same day General Davis assumed the command of the 3rd Marine Division from General Tomkins and urged the implementation of THOR as soon as practicable. On 29 May, the 320th Division used Cap Mui Lay as the staging area for another attack against Dong Ha making THOR a priority for Rosson and Cushman. Provisional Corps Vietnam ordered the completion of the THOR plan on 30 May. While the various commands involved bickered over details, the operation was finally scheduled to start on 1 July.

The forces allocated to THOR were impressive. The Air Force would have used its entire theatre force of B-52 bombers and five tactical fighter wings. The Navy was contributing four carrier wings, two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, and six destroyers. The Marines used their own 1st Marine Air Wing and one full artillery battalion, the US Army added three artillery battalions. The operation involved

³⁹⁸ Commanding General, 3rd Marine Division, to Commanding General, Provisional Corps Vietnam, 24 March 1968, letter. Subject: Enemy Artillery Concentration in the Cap Mui Lay Area, USMC History Division.

three different phases. In Phase I USAF B-52 bombers attacked the area in conjunction with tactical airstrikes to suppress the defences. Priority was given to SAM batteries. The basic assumption was that B-52s were immune to anti-aircraft guns due to their high altitude, and their electronic warfare suites would have 'spoofed' incoming SAM. Phase I was designed to hit known and suspected targets and suppress PAVN activities to cover the deployment of the four artillery battalions as close as possible to the area and the positioning of the ships. Phase II targeted the defences of Cap Mui Lay namely anti-aircraft batteries, SAM sites, and coastal guns. Artillery and naval gunfire was allocated against the air defence system to allow the fighter bombers and attack planes to engage the coastal batteries. After neutralizing the defences in Phase II, the area was to be combed by aerial observers to direct strikes and gunfire against any kind of lucrative targets.

A PAVN artillery bombardment on 20 June almost stopped THOR. The main supply dump at Dong Ha was hit, and a large part of the ammunition stockpiled for THOR was destroyed in the ensuing fires and explosions. Only a herculean effort of the Provisional Corps Vietnam in scrounging artillery ammunition from all over Vietnam saved the operation. On 1 July the B-52s started to rain bombs on Cap Mui Lay. By 2 July both the artillery and the ships were in position. On 3 July Phase II started. Despite worries about having planes and shells flying so close in space and time, the coordination plan between the various elements worked well. On 5 July the first observation planes were able to circle over the area without drawing enemy fire thus signalling the end of Phase II and the start

of Phase III. Phase III ended at 24:00 on 7 July 1968. While no US or ARVN troops were able to reach the area to produce an accurate damage assessment, the results of the operation were described in glowing terms by every service. MACV accepted the services' assessment and declared the operation a great success. Light observation planes were able to patrol the area unhindered until President Johnson ordered the termination of all flights over North Vietnam in November 1968. No coastal defence fires were reported from the area for the rest of the American involvement in Vietnam. Furthermore, the artillery fire coming from Cap Muy Lai dropped by 80 percent.³⁹⁹ The reduction in the volume of enemy artillery fire gave the 3rd Marine Division an important advantage in the next round of battles for the DMZ in late August and October.

³⁹⁹ Headquarters Provisional Corps Vietnam, Daily Intsum (intelligence summary), 1 June-31 July 1968. NARA RG 472 Box 1 (6-17-81).

Chapter 7: High Mobility and Stand-Down 1969-1971

7.1 Introduction

The Tet Offensive and its aftermath represented a critical turning point for the US strategy in the I CTZ. It made the evolution of the balance of actions from pacification to conventional abundantly clear. Not only had the communists directly attacked cities hitherto assumed secure, but it necessitated a concentration of forces to deal with these attacks and replace losses. It also forced a reduction of the resources allocated to pacification. Even if that was a setback in the pacification goal for both the III MAF and MACV, it was only a temporary setback. After Allied forces returned to the countryside, the increase in population centres under GVN control was impressive. Having spent its forces in attacking positions strongly held by Allied forces, neither the PAVN nor the VC were in position to actively contest Allied counteroffensives in the populated areas. On the ground, the Tet Offensive favoured the US and GVN in purely military terms, yet it also, as a political turning point, forced significant changes in US strategy. The suspension of military activities north of the DMZ and the gradual withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam announced by the new Nixon administration were the most readily evident changes.

These two changes set in motion a series of events that, by January 1973, led to the complete withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam. Still, despite the emphasis placed by Sorley on the change in the conduct of the ground war in 1969 and 1970, there was no real change of strategy as much as a constant adaptation to changing circumstances, enemy actions, and troop levels. In 1968, the numerical

strength of US forces in Vietnam was at its peak which allowed MACV to move from a largely defensive strategy to an offensive one. By 1969, troop withdrawals started to influence the number of units available for combat operations. By the end of 1970, large scale US operations were increasingly more difficult due to a lack of troops. Yet, despite continuing troop redeployments, US units never abandoned their large scale operations as some commentators have implied.⁴⁰⁰ The largest ground assault of the war, the incursion into Cambodia, was launched in 1970. Rather than a massive change in the way MACV was operating, as suggested by Sorley, the years between 1969 and 1970 saw a progressive reduction of the tempo of conventional war operations. Even when President Nixon changed MACV's mission, removing the destruction of enemy forces from the MACV priorities in 1969, US forces still launched several large scale assaults against enemy strongholds to continue to put pressure on the enemy and stop communist units with interfering in expanding pacification programs. By the end of 1969, PAVN units had mostly retreated across the borders in their nominally inviolable sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia.

Intense combat permeated the I CTZ in the first half of 1969. In Thua Thien and Quang Tri, the Allies were generally on the offensive, while in the two other provinces the PAVN was usually attacking Allied positions. The Allied offensives in the two northernmost provinces were designed to keep the enemy off balance and prevent a Winter-Spring offensive. A secondary aim was to destroy its base areas and shield the coastal lowlands. The main offensive focus of the

⁴⁰⁰ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, (Orlando: Harcourt 2007), p. 17.

XXIV Corps, now in charge of all US ground units in Quang Tri and Thua Thien, returned to the A Shau Valley. Operations DEWEY CANYON, MASSACHUSETTS STRIKER, APACHE SNOW, and MONTGOMERY RENDEZVOUS were launched against in the A Shau. At the same time, the 3rd Marine Division continued to protect the DMZ while the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) launched several mechanized raids, Operation REMAGEN, along the Laotian border.⁴⁰¹ While more and more US and South Vietnamese units were committed to pacification duty, the majority of these units were newly recruited and trained local forces rather than regular combat units. Instead, American combat units spent the whole of 1969 pushing farther west toward the Laotian border and engaging PAVN units.

To reduce numbers in the I CTZ, and, in part, limit friendly casualties, US forces assumed a more defensive posture toward the end of 1969 and during 1970. The 3rd Marine Division left Vietnam in November 1969 and ended the USMC ground presence in Quang Tri and Thua Thien. The 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (mechanized) and the 101st Airborne Division lingered on until 1971, but their operations in 1970 and 1971 were mainly defensive with the exception of their participation in a limited support role in Operation LAM SON 719, the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos. While US combat operations in Quang Tri and Thua Thien terminated officially in 1971, this chapter will concentrate on the offensive phase in 1969 and 1970 and skim the last few months of the American presence in northern I CTZ.

⁴⁰¹ At times the operation was reported as REMAGEN, yet the operation appears to be unnamed and that Remagen was the designation given to the Task Force performing the operation.

7.2 The III MAF new campaign plan

From a military standpoint the Tet Offensive did indeed change American strategy in Vietnam albeit not in the way the orthodox school has suggested. In the northern I CTZ, the III MAF decided to completely abandon any pretence of holding ground and focused instead on engaging and destroying enemy forces. With increased helicopter resources and effectiveness and a full mechanized brigade at his disposal (the US Army 1st Brigade, 5th Division, under the operational control of the 3rd Marine Division), the commander of the 3rd Marine Division, General Davis, continued the kind of operations his predecessor, General Tompkins, had started in 1968. Surprisingly enough the 'new' concept of operations had more in common with the 'old' search and destroy than the supposed shift towards a traditional COIN strategy. The primary mission of the 3rd Marine Division was finding, fixing and destroying enemy units and base areas. Surprisingly Marine commanders rationalized the mission as a shift toward a strategy directed to support a revised pacification strategy. With Tet the III MAF had realized that the most immediate threat to pacification were not the local insurgents but the communist's regular units.

In a reversal from General Walt's approach to strategy in Vietnam, General Cushman and his successor, General Herman Nickerson, were now determined to never let the PAVN and main force VC units come close to major population

centres.⁴⁰² Instead of reacting to PAVN action, the III MAF now was determined to aggressively push into enemy base areas and, along the borders, engage enemy units rather than letting them come down into the coastal lowlands. Instead of regarding the border areas as just a diversion, the III MAF was now determined to wrestle the control of A Shau Valley from the PAVN. Even more interestingly, after having closed down the Khe Sanh combat base was determined to hold the Khe Sanh plateau as a blocking position against infiltration from Laos. Contrary to common perception the closure of the Khe Sanh combat base in June 1968 had not ended Marine operations there. To the contrary, these operations continued under several different codenames until the withdrawal of the 3rd Marine Division at the end of 1969. Even after Westmoreland's departure from Vietnam, the overall concept of operations did not change. Based on statistics alone, the so called 'Abrams' period' saw more large scale operations than Westmoreland's reign as MACV commander.⁴⁰³ Certainly, in terms of casualties inflicted and sustained, 1969 was the bloodiest year of the war.

Yet the offensive strategy implemented in the I CTZ rested on several factors and not just on the designs of Army and Marine commanders. The aftermath of the Tet Offensive saw MACV combat forces reaching peak numerical strength everywhere in Vietnam. In the I CTZ the III MAF finally had sufficient forces to

⁴⁰² Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson Jr (1913-2000), took command of the III MAF in March 1969 from General Cushman. Nickerson had entered the Marine Corps in 1935 and served in Shanghai before 1941, against the Japanese, has been involved in the temporary occupation of Tientsin in 1946 and commanded the 7th Marine Regiment during the Korean War. He also commanded the 1st Marine Division in Vietnam in 1966-67.

⁴⁰³ Shelby Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle: A Complete Illustrated Reference to U.S. Army Combat and Support Forces in Vietnam 1961-1973*, (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2003), pp. 12-14.

both protect the major population centres and take the war to enemy bases. Furthermore, the introduction of large mechanized and airmobile US Army forces in the area finally solved the problem of the lack of mobility inherent in Marine formations. Direct observation of Army experiences with the use of airmobile tactics also allowed the Marines to make better use of their helicopter assets to further increase their mobility. The impressive performance of the 1st Cavalry Division during PEGASUS spurred the 3rd Marine Division to use helicopters to provide tactical mobility to infantry companies rather than only to deploy them from bases to operations' locales. These factors combined to make it possible to finally implement the concept originally delineated by Westmoreland in 1965. With US forces at peak strength, the RVN population more or less committed to the government side, and communist military forces exhausted, Allied forces were able to make impressive gains in both pacification and conventional operations in 1969.

The sustained Allied counteroffensive produced spectacular gains in 1969. In particular, the forced withdrawal of PAVN regular divisions and regiments outside Vietnam's border allowed a greater focus on smaller operations and local security. There was no real change in tactics or strategy orchestrated by General Abrams but, rather, a steady continuation and development of initiatives started during Westmoreland's tenure. The units deployed on pacification duty were mainly South Vietnamese, more often than not, either Regional Forces/Popular Forces or the newly established Civilian Self Defence Corps (CSDC).

On the other side of the military equation, despite the severe losses sustained in 1967 and 1968, Hanoi was not yet willing to concede military defeat on the ground, especially with the prospect of being able to convert even marginal military successes to political gains at the negotiating table in Paris.⁴⁰⁴ While Hanoi's leadership seemed to have resigned itself to a prolonged war of attrition without a spectacular military victory, it was also determined to maintain a large unit war focus. Again the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam provided Hanoi with a prime target where PAVN combat formations could be better supplied and supported from safe heavens as during its big DMZ offensives in 1966 and 1967. Yet this time the greater mass of American combat formations available meant that US troops would have been able to pre-empt enemy actions with their own aggressive moves.

As far as the III MAF was concerned, the Tet Offensive coincided with a realignment in tactics and operations. The III MAF was upgraded to an army level command including both Marine and Army formations due to the inter-service nature of the forces deployed in the I CTZ. The increase in overall numbers and equipment allowed III MAF to adopt a stronger offensive posture. Pacification, while still considered important, took a definitive back seat to conventional operations.⁴⁰⁵ In the first half of 1968, the threat to the DMZ was still considered high, and several sharp actions took place there. Aside from the relief of Khe Sanh, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) fought a series of high

⁴⁰⁴ In 1968 Washington, Saigon, and Hanoi agreed to hold talks in Paris to negotiate the end of the war. While in 1973 finally produced a temporary negotiated end of the War, the diplomatic rounds in 1969 seemed to have been used by Hanoi more as a way to improve the strategic situation (with the cessation of direct attacks on North Vietnam) rather than as a sincere effort to find a political solution.

⁴⁰⁵ Hennessy, 'Strategy', p. 143; Stanton, 'Order of Battle', pp. 12-14.

intensity battles until the threat of direct attacks receded. The increased firepower available to the III MAF also allowed it to intensify the artillery battle against the long range PAVN guns that had proved an intractable problem in 1966 and 1967. Operation THOR was launched in July 1968 with the aim of neutralizing PAVN artillery once and for all. Featuring an unprecedented concentration of conventional artillery, air strikes, and naval gunfire, the operation forced the withdrawal of PAVN artillery from the area and temporarily ended the PAVN artillery threat until cross DMZ actions were suspended on 1 November 1968 by President Johnson's order. Still, until the Easter Offensive in 1972, the DMZ witnessed mainly screening actions.

In the second half of 1968 and in 1969, the focus shifted to the Laotian border. The A Shau Valley was the target of four major named operations, DELAWARE, SOMERSET PLAINS, DEWEY CANYON, and, finally, APACHE SNOW. These operations were characterized by intensive main force confrontations and extensive employment of PAVN artillery. On the Allied side the A Shau became a synonym for heavy casualties, especially in 1969 with the final confrontation at Dong Ap Bia better known as Hamburger Hill. Despite the casualties, the A Shau was deemed of critical importance due to its proximity to Hue and the massive logistical network set up by the PAVN in the valley itself. Except for Operation DEWEY CANYON, the other three main operations were all performed by Army airmobile formations due to the particular nature of the terrain and the inability to provide overland supply. Even DEWEY CANYON required an extensive commitment of III MAF and Army helicopter assets.

At the same time, contradicting the usual contention that Khe Sanh was definitely abandoned at the conclusion of the siege, several operations featuring Army and Marine units were staged from the area to check infiltration and logistical build up from Laos. In the framework of these interdiction actions during March and April 1969, a mechanized and armoured US force, Task Force Remagen, operated along PAVN roads to destroy the enemy logistics network in the area.

Despite, or, more accurately, as a consequence of, the emphasis placed on conventional operations, the period between 1968 and 1970 also witnessed the biggest gain in pacification not only in the I CTZ but also in the entire RVN. What made these gains even more surprising was the fact that, despite what has been suggested by several authors, the basic MACV strategy did not change until President Richard Nixon modified the overall mission in 1969.⁴⁰⁶ Protecting the population through a combination of large and small operations designed to keep the enemy military forces off balance remained the basic mission of US forces. Abrams did not reduce large unit operations until ordered to do so by President Nixon, and large offensive operations such as the incursion into Cambodia were still launched even after MACV's change of orders. What changed in terms of pacification was the lowering of expectations and the increased reliance on military security rather than nation building as the primary driver.

7.3 Protecting the DMZ

⁴⁰⁶ Msg Wheeler JCS to McCain and Abrams, 6 Aug 1969, Abrams Papers, CMH.

In Quang Tri province the 3rd Marine division was largely involved in interdicting enemy movement along Route 9 with regimental sized operations in the Khe Sanh general area. The pattern of operations along the DMZ was constant in the period between February and April 1969. PAVN forces would try to move south from the DMZ triggering reactions from US forces that usually ended in reversals for the North Vietnamese. PAVN units were described as well equipped, supplied, and trained, but were unwillingly to commit to large engagements beyond defending strong hill positions and then withdrawing.⁴⁰⁷ These relatively minor operations along the DMZ led to the discovery of considerable amounts of supplies further disrupting enemy actions.⁴⁰⁸ By and large the three independent PAVN regiment used in operations along the DMZ lacked the strength to push back the reinforced 3rd Marine Division and the elements of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division operating there.

PAVN operations were further disrupted when XXIV corps launched a mechanized raid along Route 9 and Route 926 that were used by the enemy to move supplies and troops from Laos. The operation was launched on 16 March 1969 and continued for 47 days.⁴⁰⁹ Task Force Remagen, consisting of one tank company, two mechanized infantry companies, one ARVN cavalry company, one 155mm self-propelled battery, and several support units, operated along the Laotian border destroying several PAVN supply depots and mauling two PAVN

⁴⁰⁷ Charles Smith, *US Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown 1969*, (Washington: USMC, 1988) pp. 56-57

⁴⁰⁸ Smith, 'High Mobility', p. 56

⁴⁰⁹ Combat operation after action report -- Operation Task Force Remagen, 16 March 1969 -- 29 April 1969, RG 479, NARA.

regiments.⁴¹⁰ The Task force spotted enemy wheeled vehicles in Laos in several occasions, especially at night, but without an authorization from MACV to cross the international border, it was able only to direct artillery fire and airstrikes at them. Losses inflicted by these missions remained unrecorded.

The combination of enemy losses suffered in the previous year, and aggressive US operations stymied enemy actions in Quang Tri to the point where the commanding general of the 3rd Marine Division, General Raymond Davis, was confident of having the entire province under complete control in April 1969.⁴¹¹ While such claims could have been premature, the rate of enemy activity in the province was indeed at its lowest in 1969.⁴¹² Not only did overall numbers of attacks decreased, but they were confined to the DMZ and the Khe Sanh area with only one significant incident in the vicinity of Quang Tri City.⁴¹³ For the rest of the year, enemy actions were usually limited to the DMZ and the Allied defensive positions south of it, with the combat bases at Gio Linh and Con Thien being the principal targets. Con Thien was subjected to several battalion attacks. Still the Allied operations had the intended effect of protecting the populated areas.

7.4 A Shau, round 2

At the beginning of 1969, the A Shau Valley was again the most important locale in the northern I CTZ. Intelligence reports derived from reconnaissance units, signal

⁴¹⁰ Confirmed enemy casualties were just 76, but the 1-77 Armor AAR mentions 250 probable enemy KIA. Operation Task Force Remagen, main report and enclosure 1.

⁴¹¹ MajGen Raymond G. Davis intvw, 7Apr69, p. 305, Oral HistColl, USMC History Division.

⁴¹² MACV, 1969, pp. III-164-204.

⁴¹³ MACV, 1969, p. III-165.

intelligence, and other sources identified four enemy regiments, including an artillery one in the Valley. More ominously, air reconnaissance has reported a massive increase in truck movement in the Valley. Air Force and Marine recon and attack planes were reporting up to 1,000 truck sightings per day on apparently improved all weather roads.⁴¹⁴ Antiaircraft fire from the Valley had increased, and it was reported that enemy gunners were engaging targets as high as 16,000 feet with weapons of 37mm, 25mm, and 12.7mm.⁴¹⁵ The increased presence of enemy troops in the A Shau was interpreted by III MAF intelligence as the main indicator of a Winter-Spring offensive aimed directly at Hue. With the memories of the military and political consequences of the previous year's attack on the city still warm, both XXIV Corps and III MAF decided to pre-empt enemy action with an Allied offensive straight into the Valley.⁴¹⁶ If the situation in the Quang Tri province was judged safe, the reports of increased troop movement in the A Shau Valley boded ill for the safety of Thua Thien and its provincial capital, the imperial city of Hue.

The Allied scheme of operations was different this time. The commander of XXIV corps, General Stillwell, decided that raids, even division sized raids, were not effective enough. A permanent presence in the Valley was necessary to stop the PAVN from using the Valley as a safe conduit for troops and supplies. Yet a permanent presence there could not be supported by air and helicopter resupply, as operations DELAWARE and SOMERSET PLAINS had revealed. This time the Allied forces needed to 'invade' the A Shau Valley and build a road into the heart of it. The first stretch of the road, from the main base of the 101st Airborne Division, Camp Eagle, to the eastern entrance of A Shau

⁴¹⁴ Smith, 'High Mobility', p. 27; Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 48.

⁴¹⁵ III MAF Periodic Intelligence Report 1-69, dtd 7Jan69, pp. 1-3, USMC History Collection.

⁴¹⁶ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', pp. 48-49.

was completed by early 1969.⁴¹⁷ Then the Valley was supposed to be cleared from enemy forces in a series of closely staggered assault operations.

The first operation, DEWEY CANYON, was an overland advance by the 9th Marine Regiment (3rd Marine Division) from Vandergrift Combat Base on the Khe Sanh plateau in the Da Krong Valley just north of A Shau proper. The 9th Marines was supported by element of the 2nd ARVN Infantry Regiment and five Marine artillery batteries (two equipped with 105mm howitzers, two with 155mm, and one with 4.2" mortars) with additional Army and ARVN artillery committed later. The three organic battalions of the 9th Marines were to advance south from Vandergrift, mainly on foot, under the constant cover of an artillery umbrella gradually extending south from a series of successive fire support bases. The first string of fire bases was established between 18 and 21 January 1969, and the first phase of DEWEY CANYON started on 22 January. The advance south of the three Marine battalions was initially uneventful. Enemy contacts were minimal and usually with isolated snipers or small covering units, the majority of the PAVN forces being located farther south.

By the last week of January the main opponent proved again to be the weather, with adverse flying conditions disrupting the movement of artillery units by helicopter and supply missions. At the same time, enemy attacks by fire increased with the use of 122mm guns/howitzers operating from Laos outside the Allied artillery counter-battery range. Only US Army 175mm howitzers had the necessary range for engaging the PAVN 122mm, but they were notoriously inaccurate. Counter-battery was thus dependent on tactical air, and, in turn, tactical air was severely restricted by weather. Furthermore, adverse weather hampered the delivery of supplies to the engaged battalions and their supporting artillery. DEWEY CANYON was halted until the weather improved, and

⁴¹⁷ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 48.

forward companies were ordered to consolidate in their battalion defensive localities. On 5 February, one Marine company was ambushed while redeploying and suffered heavy casualties.⁴¹⁸ Radar controlled parachute drops of supplies from heavy helicopters and transport planes were attempted during the period, but only when the weather improved on 10 February was DEWEY CANYON able to proceed again.

When the three Marine battalions resumed their drive south on 11 February, the PAVN had had time to redeploy troops and prepare defensive positions to engage the 9th Marines. Soon the Marines were engaged by several determined counterattacks which were all broken up by heavy firepower concentrations. On 17 February, during the 25 hour countrywide Tet Truce, PAVN sappers attacked one of the fire bases supporting the 9th Marines, Fire Base Cunningham, but were repulsed. The Marines lost four KIA and 46 WIA with a confirmed body count of 37 PAVN bodies, 13 of them killed inside the base perimeter. Even more telling during the three hours of combat, the artillery in the base expended 3,270 rounds, 147 of them being Flechette/Beehive rounds.⁴¹⁹ The day after, 18 February, the 1/9 Marines was heavily engaged with PAVN elements, and units in contact had to request napalm air strikes within 50 meters of friendly forces. Yet they were able to capture two 122mm guns and one Soviet made tracked prime mover. By 20 February, the forward companies of the regiment had closed with the Laotian border and were able to report heavy movement on the other side.

While the regiment was able to direct artillery and air strikes against suspected movement across the international border, it was not able to effectively stop movement in Laos. The commander of the 9th Marines, Colonel Barrows, requested authorization to send troops across the border into Laos. While XXIV Corps, III MAF, and MACV debated,

⁴¹⁸ Company G 2/9 Marines suffered 5 KIA and 18 WIA on 5 February and was forced to disengage at night. Smith, 'High Mobility', pp. 35-36.

⁴¹⁹ The Beehive round was a canister round designed for close range direct fire, it was usually employed when the guns and the crew were directly under attack. Smith, 'High Mobility', p. 39.

Colonel Barrows did send H Company, 2/9 Marines into Laos to conduct an ambush during the night between 21 and 22 February. The company successfully ambushed a PAVN motor convoy. After the successful ambush, Saigon finally authorized an expansion of the operational boundary for DEWEY CANYON directly into Laos. Until 1 March the 9th Marines operated on both sides of the border engaging in several clashes with PAVN units and either capturing or destroying considerable amounts of heavy weapons, logistic equipment, trucks, ammunitions and supplies. DEWEY CANYON was officially terminated on 18 March 1969, but the offensive phase of the operations concluded on 1 March, the remaining 17 days being spent in retracting the forces back to Vandergrift Combat Base.

The results of the operations were impressive. Twelve 122mm guns had been captured or destroyed along with four 85mm field guns, 73 antiaircraft guns of various calibres, 1,466 individual and crew served weapons, more than one million of rounds of small arms ammunitions and a quarter of a million of pounds of rice. Vehicles captured included 66 trucks, 15 tractors, and three armoured personnel carriers. Enemy casualties were heavy with 1,617 confirmed KIA and 5 POW. Marine casualties were considerably less but still heavy. The 9th Marines reported to have lost 130 KIA, 920 WIA, and one missing in action.⁴²⁰ Yet, despite the success of DEWEY CANYON, mere days after the operation had ended, intelligence sources noted again an increase in enemy movements in the A Shau Valley.

To ensure the success of DEWEY CANYON was not wasted, General Stillwell assembled approximately two divisions' worth of troops to enter the A Shau Valley. The first assault, MASSACHUSETTS STRIKER, was aimed at the southern part of the Valley. It started on 1 March with the construction of Fire Base Whip. The 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne entered

⁴²⁰ After Action Report ("Special File") of Operation Dewey Canyon of 3rd Marine Division, 01/10/1969 - 03/18/1969 Enclosure B, 9th Marine Regiment ComC.

the A Shau on 11 March assaulting close to an old fire base called Veghel. MASSACHUSETTS STRIKER experienced heavy enemy resistance from its first day. D Company, 1/502nd Parachute Infantry Battalion was ambushed immediately after landing with the loss of six helicopters. Enemy fire and fog prevented the landing of additional reinforcements until mid-morning when the rest of the 1/502nd was able to land and reinforce the beleaguered D Company. PAVN units withdrew from the area and no heavy contact was experienced until 17 March when the lead platoon of A Company, 1/502nd encountered heavy enemy resistance on a hill called Dong A Tay. A full PAVN battalion was entrenched on the hill, and it took several days for the American troops to dislodge the enemy. MASSACHUSETTS STRIKER involved a total of five American and four South Vietnamese battalions scouring the southern part of the A Shau Valley with an average of six battalions engaged at any one time. It produced 175 enemy KIA, 2 POW, 1 defector, 857 individual weapons, 40 crew served weapons and 30 vehicles captured by the 101st Airborne Division and the attached South Vietnamese units.⁴²¹

Immediately after MASSACHUSETTS STRIKER, XXIV Corps launched its largest operation to date in the Valley with elements of the 101st Airborne Division and the 3rd Marine Division. The operation, APACHE SNOW, aimed at clearing the central (101st Airborne) and north-western (3rd Marine) parts of the Valley once and for all and allow the completion of a road along with the establishment of a permanent combat base. PAVN units withdrawing from the MASSACHUSETTS STRIKER area of operations ran into the eight battalions including an armoured cavalry squadron that General Stillwell had sent into the southern area of operations of APACHE SNOW. Seven other battalions, three

⁴²¹ 101st Airborne Division Headquarters, ORLL for the period ending on 31 July 1969; USAF reports upped the enemy KIA at 223, Project CHECO A Shau Valley Campaign December 1968 May 1968, CHECO collection Box #: 01, Folder #: 26; D076.3A, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

Marine and four South Vietnamese, were operating in the northern half of the operational area. On 10 May, elements of B Company, 3/187 PIR were subjected to heavy fire by PAVN infantry near a hill indicated on the map as Hill 937, called Dong Ap Bia by the locals.

The initial fire-fight evolved into a ten day battle between two battalions of the 29th PAVN Infantry Regiment and four Allied battalions, three American (including the 2/501 PIR sent to reinforce the initial force) and one South Vietnamese. The 29th Regiment fought from prepared positions and with artillery support from Laos; Allied forces, on the other hand, subjected the hill, later renamed Hamburger Hill, to intensive tactical strikes, artillery barrage and even naval gunfire from the USS New Jersey. The hill was finally taken on 20 May, and, after that date, enemy contacts decreased sharply.⁴²² Despite the decrease in enemy contacts, APACHE SNOW continued until 7 June, when the operation was officially terminated. In the second part of the operation, the Allied forces discovered several important caches of ammunition and supply. The battle for Dong Ap Bia produced an enemy body count of 691 KIA, 5 POW, 241 individual and 40 crew served weapons captured at a cost of 78 US KIA and 536 WIA.⁴²³ The 29th Infantry regiment was virtually wiped out with two battalions and the regimental headquarters destroyed. Intelligence sources and MACV SOG reconnaissance teams reported casualties in excess of 1,000 moved back to Laos.⁴²⁴ One captured PAVN soldier reported that the two companies he was familiar with had suffered 80 percent casualties during the battle.⁴²⁵ To relieve pressure on Dong Ap Bia, the PAVN 6th Regiment launched an attack on Fire Support Base Airborne with its organic 806th Battalion and the K-12 Sapper battalion on 13 May. The attack was repulsed with heavy

⁴²² 101st Airborne Division Headquarters, ORLL for the period ending on 31 July 1969.

⁴²³ 101st Airborne Division Headquarters, ORLL for the period ending on 31 July 1969.

⁴²⁴ Letter from Col. Joseph Conway to Samuel Zaffiri quoted in Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 286

⁴²⁵ AAR Operation Apache Snow, XXIV Corps, 27 Aug 1969, enclosure 1, Folder 01, Bud Harton Collection.

casualties. Total results for the operations were 1021 enemy KIA and 6 POW, 613 individual and 141 crew served weapons, 53 vehicles, more than 600,000 rounds and 56,486 pounds of rice. Total friendly casualties were 121 killed and 719 wounded.⁴²⁶

The Day after the termination of APACHE SNOW, Operation MONTGOMERY RENDEZVOUS began. The operation lasted until July when it then continued under the name of LOUISIANA LEE. In response to sightings of enemy tanks in the Valley, American tanks from the 3/5 Cavalry and 2/34 Armor were deployed for the first time into the A Shau. Contacts were light and sporadic with the exception of attack on Fire Support Bases Berchtesgaden and Currahee on 14 and 15 June. Still, the operation blocked the major infiltration routes toward Hue and forced the PAVN troops to remain in Laos for the majority of the summer. Enemy losses were considerable with a total on 31 July of 451 KIA, 8 POW, 231 individual and 47 crew-served weapons captured.⁴²⁷

While XXIV Corps was engaged in its offensive in the A Shau, there were no sizeable attacks on Hue or Quang Tri. Despite having suffered significant losses, especially during the battle for Dong A Tay and Dong Ap Bia, the Allied forces were able to immobilize at least three PAVN regiments and prevent a repeat attack on Hue. Engaging the enemy forces in the highland region instead of the populated lowlands, XXIV Corps had been able to utilize its firepower superiority without risking collateral damage and not only engage the enemy but also disrupt its supply system. In April a major supply area, nicknamed Warehouse 54, was discovered and subjected to intensive tactical air and Arc Light strikes that produced numerous secondary explosions. A subsequent insertion of combat troops yielded a major concentration of enemy supplies and logistic

⁴²⁶ AAR Operation Apache Snow, XXIV Corps, 27 Aug 1969, p. 10, Folder 01 Bud Harton Collection.

⁴²⁷ 101st Airborne Division Headquarters, ORLL for the period ending on 31 July 1969

structures.⁴²⁸ Taking the offensive to the heart of the enemy base areas had indeed been beneficial to the pacification program more than aimless patrols and static defensive conducted missions on the coastal lowlands.⁴²⁹

7.4 1970, the Year of Withdrawal

By early 1970, the situation in the I CTZ had dramatically improved. The majority of the PAVN regular formations had been pushed back to Laos to recuperate and rebuild. NLF forces were exhausted and, for the most part, incapable of operating effectively. Faced with a peak strength of 94 enemy battalions in mid-1968, by the end of 1969 the Allied forces operating in the two northernmost provinces of Vietnam were confronted by only 29 battalions inside the Corps Tactical Zone or along the borders.⁴³⁰ There were additional forces lurking in Laos and North Vietnam, but after the severe losses incurred during 1969 these units did not pose an immediate problem. Furthermore, they were not directly involved in the fighting in Quang Tri and Thua Thien. The borders appeared reasonably secure; infiltration and attacks from Laos and North Vietnam had decreased. Even more importantly, from a long term perspective, the internal insurgency also appeared defeated. While it was not a victory, it looked like victory. Pacification was making spectacular progress. In December 1969, 87.4 percent of the hamlets in Quang Tri were reported as secure as were 77 percent

⁴²⁸ Project CHECO A Shau Valley Campaign December 1968 May 1968, p. 17, CHECO Collection Box #: 01, Folder #: 26; D076.3A

⁴²⁹ Still the 101st Airborne Division conducted two more conventional COIN operations in the coastal lowlands of Thua Thien province, NEAVADA EAGLE and KENTUCKY JUMPER, designed to interdict enemy movements in the populated areas and continue to apply pressure on local VC elements. 101st Airborne Division Headquarters, ORLL for the period ending on 30 April 1969, pp. 3-4.

⁴³⁰ Smith, 'High Mobility', p. 7.

of the Hamlets in Thua Thien.⁴³¹ The ARVN was steadily improving. The PAVN aggressiveness was in steady decline. The situation looked sufficiently safe to allow US troops to withdraw at an accelerated pace.

Yet these accomplishments rested on a delicate military balance. PAVN units had been defeated in the field by a combination of mobility and firepower. The bulk of this firepower and mobility came from American formations. While ARVN forces had proved their mettle at Hue, Quang Tri, along the DMZ, and in the A Shau Valley, they had always operated in close cooperation with their allies benefitting from their supporting arms. ARVN units had yet to operate in division and corps sized formations without close American supervision. How long the favourable military balance could have been maintained in the face of an increasing withdrawal of American forces was an open question.⁴³² Yet the pace of the American withdrawal was increasing. In November 1969, the whole 3rd Marine Division left the I CTZ leaving only one full US division stationed in Quang Tri and Thua Thien, the 101st Airborne. On 9 March 1970, the III MAF passed responsibility for senior command in the I CTZ to General Melvin Zais and his XXIV Corps. The III MAF was officially withdrawn from Vietnam on 14 April 1971.

While PAVN forces had been pushed out of the populated lowlands and kept at arm's length, it had been a relatively costly process. Allied casualties had been high. More importantly it had been a process that had required both manpower and firepower in equal measure. The departure of US formations from the I CTZ

⁴³¹ Hennessy, 'Strategy', p. 163; Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Southeast Asia Programs (OASD (SA)), Vol. 9, p. 180.

⁴³² Indeed in 1971 there was a spike in terrorist attacks in the I CTZ, MSG Abrams COMUSMACV to McCain CINCPAC 5 Aug 1971, Abrams Papers, CMH.

not only reduced the number of combat troops available but also the available firepower. While both the South Vietnamese Army and Air Force ARVN were constantly improved and upgraded with a massive infusion of modern equipment, there was a definite reduction in overall numbers, effectiveness, and, even more ominously, logistic capabilities. Notwithstanding the expansion of South Vietnamese forces, the truth was that, at the end of the US withdrawal, the South Vietnamese would have around half of the forces available in 1968 to defend the same geographical area and with much less fire support.

The other open question was the lasting effect of the accelerated pacification efforts. The relative success of pacification had not rested on some kind of miracle plan or special program but on an almost brutal application of coercion measures and conventional combat operations to break the military arm of the NLF. While the Army and the Marines had never ceased to employ civic action and propaganda, these activities had never been the primary motivator for enemy defections.⁴³³ As Palazzo pointed out, commenting on the Australian experience, even in this successful phase the guerrilla cadres were only lightly touched.⁴³⁴ Military and police operations were hampering enemy operations and reducing their contacts with the population, but the hard core of the insurgency had not been physically destroyed or converted.

Despite these limits pacification appeared to be working. The combination of military operations, losses of cadre and the local backlash from the Tet Offensive had worked to strengthen the Allied position. Areas once considered hotbeds of

⁴³³ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 398; MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', p. 142.

⁴³⁴ Palazzo, 'Military operations', p. 156.

VC activity were now considered so safe that American officers were driving alone without any concerns.⁴³⁵ Even acknowledging these limits and doubts, by 1970 the government's fortunes were on the rise even in the two northernmost provinces. As far the I CTZ was concerned, if the military situation in December 1967 appeared critical it was now secure and steadily improving. Thua Thien and Quang Tri were the first provinces to reach the elusive goal of having 100 percent of the population under government control.⁴³⁶ PAVN formations had vacated the two provinces and were outside South Vietnam's borders. While in 1968 and 1969 III MAF was still an active force in the area, a large share of military progress was directly related to the US Army units employed in the area. In 1969 the security of Quang Tri and Thua Thien rested completely on the US Army and ARVN units stationed there. Increased firepower, mobility, and overall attached support had turned the balance in the conventional battles. The favourable conventional military balance, in turn, reduced the pressure that conventional enemy formations were exerting on pacification activities. If in 1967 the PAVN was finding a favourable ground in the northern area of the I CTZ for its strategy of attrition, by 1969 it had shifted its interest to other areas.

Yet even during the relatively quiet months of 1970, there were some significant incidents that highlighted the fragile nature of the Allied progress in Vietnam. Concerned with possible enemy activities coming from the A Shau Valley, the 101st Airborne Division had occupied several Fire Support Bases blocking the exits from the Valley. One of them, FSB Ripcord, was besieged from March to

⁴³⁵ Author interview with Col. Jerry D. Morelock USA (RET) dated June 2009.

⁴³⁶ Smith, 'High Mobility', p. 294.

July causing the loss of 112 KIA and 689 WIA. MACV decided that the fire base was not worth such a price and toward the end of July completed the withdrawal of the US forces from Ripcord. After the retreat from of Ripcord, FSB O'Reilly was subjected to a siege and, despite heavy air and artillery support including 19 B-52 ARCLIGHT strikes, the South Vietnamese General Staff decided to withdraw the defender of O'Reilly, elements of the 1st ARVN infantry regiment from the 1st Infantry Division, in October.

While the sieges of Ripcord and O'Reilly are just footnotes to an otherwise successful year, they provided some notes of caution. In the official rationale for the evacuation from Ripcord, the 101st Airborne Division cited the need to avoid immobilizing too many troops for a static defensive mission and the political repercussions of a potential defeat that was likened to Dien Bien Phu.⁴³⁷ Yet even with these caveats the entire rationale of the operations was described as the destruction of PAVN forces involved in the siege. The official reports tallied 422 PAVN KIA, 6 POW, and 93 individual and 24 crew-served weapons captured for the entire period of the siege.⁴³⁸ Despite Lewis Sorley's claim that US operations shifted focus from inflicting casualties to providing security for the population, the wording of official reports and the nature of the operations itself does not support this contention.⁴³⁹

Operations like the establishment of Fire Support Base Ripcord were just a continuation of the previous pattern of offensive strikes designed to defeat

⁴³⁷ Headquarters 101st Airborne Division to CG XXIV Corps, subject Firebase Ripcord 23 July 1970, RG 479 NARA; hereafter Ripcord AAR.

⁴³⁸ Ripcord AAR.

⁴³⁹ Sorley, 'Better War', p. 20-21.

PAVN units before they were able to mass for their own offensive operations. The objective of the operations was to engage the 803rd and 29th PAVN Regiments in the A Shau Valley.⁴⁴⁰ Furthermore the overall operation, dubbed CHICAGO PEAK, was determined successful, and the losses caused to the PAVN forces in the A Shau Valley were, in the opinion of the commander of the 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, General Benjamin Harrison, sufficient to cripple the PAVN offensive capability in the I CTZ for the rest of 1970 and 1971 thus supporting the overall campaign plan.⁴⁴¹

7.5 Wrapping up

The defence and evacuation of Ripcord was the last major American ground engagement in the I CTZ. Even if the 101st Airborne Division and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division were involved in the incursion into Laos the following year, the combat role of their ground elements was marginal. LAM SON 719 was the first major multi-division operation resting solely on the shoulders of the ARVN thus lying outside the scope of this work. Still it is worth noting that the simple act of launching LAM SON 719 was a testament to the military effectiveness of the US combat forces in the I CTZ. When the first two Marine battalions were landed at Da Nang in 1965, there was a definite threat against American installations, and the South Vietnamese army was not considered capable of protecting against it. By the end of 1970, the ARVN was taking the war to the enemy sanctuaries. While the results of LAM SON 719 are still subjected to

⁴⁴⁰ Ripcord AAR.

⁴⁴¹ Benjamin Harrison, *Hell on an Hill top: America's Last Major Battle in Vietnam*, (Lincoln: iUniverse Press, 2004), p. 181.

debate as to overall effectiveness, the net result of the American military intervention was to have given the ARVN time to recover and rebuild. How the ARVN exploited this chance was beyond the control of the American military.

Despite six years of continuous combat operations, only after the Tet Offensive in 1968 were the III MAF and the newly established XXIV Corps able to implement a combined campaign plan that addressed both the conventional and unconventional threats that the communist forces posed to the South Vietnamese government in the I CTZ. Surprisingly the finished product, the 1969 and 1970 campaign plans, had more in common with the ideas put forward by MACV in 1965 and 1966 than with COIN orthodoxy. The military focus was the destruction of PAVN conventional forces outside the coastal lowlands rather than using regular forces to just garrison hamlets and villages or conduct small unit patrols. As stated by the 1970 III MAF combined campaign plan: 'the most effective way of assuring security . . . is to keep enemy forces away from [the people]'.⁴⁴² This meant that regular Allied forces, American, South Vietnamese or the 2nd Marine Brigade, Republic of Korea Marine Corps, would undertake offensives against enemy base areas while the protection of the population was left to local security forces.

The I CTZ was divided in four broad areas according to the degree of security. The Secured Zone, free of enemy units and with only marginal guerrilla presence was left under the control of the civilian government's organizations. The Consolidation Zone had been cleared from major enemy units but still had

⁴⁴² III MAF/I CTZ Combined Campaign Plan 1970, dtd 13Dec1969, Annex B pp. 1-1-1-2, Folder 004, USMC History Collection.

enemy infrastructure and guerrilla cells, but, without the support of enemy conventional units, it was considered sufficiently secure to conduct traditional COIN actions with local forces under civilian control. Beyond the Consolidation Zone was the Clearing Zone. This was the area where the communists were still in control and where they had base areas and combat units. In this area, operations were controlled by ARVN or Allied military commanders, and their purpose was the destruction of the base areas. Finally there was the Border Surveillance Zone. Here the aim of the Allied forces was to 'detect, engage, and deter' PAVN forces from entering South Vietnam.⁴⁴³ In 1969 this area was still the fiefdom of American combat units, but, in 1970, more and more South Vietnamese units were employed there.

While this new concept of operations was touted as the embodiment of the 'One War' approach championed by General Abrams it was more an evolution of the original approach outlined by Westmoreland in 1966. Furthermore the new III MAF campaign plan almost completely removed regular units from the first two zones and from the day to day tasks of pacification. Despite the new terms, the plans still placed its military emphasis on the destruction of the PAVN or at least in its removal from South Vietnam's borders. The Marine official history contends that the disinterest in pacification had allowed the enemy Tet Offensive.⁴⁴⁴ The truth was that the Allies had recognized that the Tet Offensive had been conducted mainly by enemy conventional forces attacking population centres, and this was the most serious threat to RVN security. The 1969 and

⁴⁴³ Graham A. Cosmas, Terence P. Murray, *US Marines in Vietnam: 1970-1971 Vietnamization and Redeployment*, (Washington: USMC 1986), p. 10.

⁴⁴⁴ Cosmas&Murray, 'Vietnamization and Redeployment', p. 7.

1970 campaign plans highlighted the need to keep enemy units outside the populated areas through the destruction of their bases in South Vietnam and forcing them to withdraw to Laos and North Vietnam.

The new plan also placed a heavy emphasis on offensive operations, emphasis that required the presence of a considerable mass of manoeuvre battalions available to undertake these offensives. While this reserve was available in 1969, troop withdrawals and political considerations curtailed it in 1970 to the point where offensive operations were less frequent and less effective. The unwillingness to risk casualties in the A Shau in 1970 was critical evidence of the latter tendency. While Nixon's Vietnamization program was indeed strengthening the ARVN, the simple fact that US units were leaving Vietnam at the same time while not being replaced on a one to one basis with new ARVN formations meant that there would have been fewer and fewer troops available to implement the campaign plan.

Even with these caveats, it is undeniable that the 1969 and 1970 period represented the culminating period of the US military effort in Vietnam. Yet this apex was not due to a sudden and almost miraculous change of strategy but, rather, to a steady evolution of an operational concept that placed the enemy combat forces at the centre of Allied activities. If a departure from previous concepts existed, it was the discarding of the guerrilla-centric approach championed by Lewis Walt in 1965 and 1966 and the realignment of the III MAF toward the operational concept championed by Westmoreland. In the end the two subsequent commanders of the III MAF, Generals Cushman and Nickerson,

espoused the 'big unit' war as the focus of US direct involvement leaving local security forces to deal with pacification.

Chapter 8: Victory Reassessed

8.1 Army success versus Marine failure?

Usually the history of the American intervention in Vietnam is presented as a comparison between a bad US Army and a good US Marine Corps. As already discussed there are differences and slight variations, but usually the US Army is considered the less effective service and the Marines the smart one. This can be a good argument for a drill sergeant's tales, but it is not a valid historical argument. While many later commentators have focused on the dichotomy between pacification and conventional war, the real problem was that these two aspects were strongly intertwined. This inconvenient truth has often been ignored. More ominously, the majority of analyses have not addressed the specific details of pacification and large unit operations. As Dale Andrade recently noted, the focus of the debate has often been on the choice of strategy between conventional war and counterinsurgency.⁴⁴⁵ The proponents of this interpretation have assumed that the US Army-dominated MACV opted for conventional war because it was rooted in the US Army's strategic culture. Furthermore, the same critics have assumed that the III MAF's more population centric strategy was not only theoretically more sound but also more successful. Two key elements have made this interpretation difficult to accept. On the ground, security was, in large part, driven by military initiatives rather than socioeconomic development. Also, security was created by destroying enemy

⁴⁴⁵ Andrade, 'Westmoreland', pp. 146-147.

forces rather than enemy forces being destroyed by security. Judging from the case study presented in this work and by overall data from the entire Republic of Vietnam, as far as military operations were concerned, the US Army was a more effective instrument than the US Marine Corps.

The previous chapter analysed the effects of the introduction of large Army units in the two northernmost provinces of RVN and the resulting improvements in the overall security situation there. While the introduction of US Army combat units had to be seen in the context of the Tet offensive and its aftermath, the change in III MAF command, the introduction of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), and a centralized approach to pacification, it is difficult to deny some sort of linkage between the Army involvement in the area and the drastic change in the military situation. Even with all the inherent limitations of this kind of analysis, the enemy to friendly casualty ratios are more favourable for Army units than for the USMC. US Army units were more effective in dealing with enemy regular forces. The reduced pressure exerted by enemy large units allowed the shift of more resources to local security initiatives, and, in turn, this increased the breathing space for pacification activities that resulted in record gains in 1968 and 1969.

But why was the US Army more effective in dealing with the enemy than the Marines? The two services employed broadly the same equipment, their units were organized along similar lines, and their doctrine was supposed to be the same. This chapter will argue that despite the similarities several key elements at various levels, tactical, operational, and strategic, offered deep contrasts

between the two organizations and resulted in the superior Army performance. At the tactical level, the Marines lacked the required firepower to deal with enemy regular formations in the way their own operational concept required them to do. At an operational level, the Marines lacked the mobility required by their own concept of operations. At the strategic level, the Marine command was unable to properly assess the situation in Vietnam and to develop a balanced concept of operations that addressed all the threats. All these differences stemmed more from institutional culture rather individual preferences, geographical limitations, or equipment. Even when equipment or tactics were the immediate cause, these differences traced their origins to the two institutions' strategic culture.

8.2 One war, two wars

As previously discussed in chapter 4, by 1965 the choice between counterinsurgency or conventional war had been already made by Hanoi's leadership. Hanoi created an hybrid environment where conventional forces, guerrillas, and insurgents all contributed to destabilize the RVN government. Furthermore, as a reaction to successful government initiatives in the previous years the role of conventional military forces gradually expanded. Due to a combination of geographical, political, logistic, and operational constraints US and RVN forces were never able to wrest the strategic initiative from Hanoi. In such an environment MACV was thus forced to react to strategic decisions made by Hanoi rather than Washington and Saigon. In operational terms the Communists had the ability to strike at will almost anywhere in the RVN in

support of their non-conventional activities forcing the Allies to respond in kind or lose important political and geographical objectives.

In such a strategic situation, General Walt's decision to emphasize pacification in 1966 had several merits, but it was also predicated on the assumption that the military situation was evolving in favour of the Allies. What is usually overlooked was that Walt's shift from large operations to pacification assumed the defeat of communist conventional forces. On the logistical side the III MAF concept of operations assumed that enemy regular forces were an outgrowth of local insurgents and depended on them for supplies, recruitment, and support. In such a framework, General Krulak asserted that:

if we can destroy the guerrilla fabric among the people, we will automatically deny the larger units the food and the intelligence and the taxes, and the other support they need.⁴⁴⁶

Such basic assumptions have never been seriously debated either by III MAF officers at the time or by historians for several decades since they formed the base of III MAF concept of operations in 1966 and 1967. These assumptions also linked with the idea that if these larger units indeed appeared they could have been easily dealt with.⁴⁴⁷ Predicating its strategy on these ideas, III MAF never seriously debated, war gamed or planned for the introduction of large enemy units in its TAOR or their effect on other ongoing operations.

⁴⁴⁶ CGFMFPac, "Pacific Operations" Tab F, HQMC, General Officers Symposium Book, 1967, pp . F6-F7.

⁴⁴⁷ CGFMFPac, "Pacific Operations" Tab F, HQMC, General Officers Symposium Book, 1967, pp . F6-F7.

General Walt's concept of operations was thus a single determined focus on pacification, the main war, and a secondary focus on destruction of large communist formations if the opportunity arose. In essence the III MAF fought two disconnected wars.

On the opposite side, MACV was, despite Westmoreland's 'two wars' label, fighting a much more integrated war where enemy main forces and pacification each represented just a single aspect of the threat. Search and Destroy operations, besides the negative connotation they acquired later, were just an effective means to keep enemy units out of the populated areas. Behind this military shield the US Army undertook pacification. While, for the reasons discussed in chapter 4, Westmoreland never embraced pacification as a primary mission of the US Army in Vietnam, pacification occupied an important share of US Army activities even during Westmoreland's tenure. Area security, civic action, and related activities were performed by every US unit in Vietnam. In 1967 alone, at the supposed height of Westmoreland's conventional offensives, the US military (Army, Marines, Navy and Air Force) built or repaired 31,000 houses, 83 hospitals, 180 kilometres of irrigation systems, 200 churches, 380 dispensaries, 225 market places, 72 orphanages, 1,055 schools, over 2,000 wells, dispensed 10,286,677 medical treatments and distributed 41,573 tons of food.⁴⁴⁸

A considerable achievement for a commander purportedly interested only in large battles. In tactical terms there were few differences between US Army and USMC pacification. Both services used their personnel and technical resources to build facilities, distribute commodities, and provide security. The real

⁴⁴⁸ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 397; MACV, 1967, p. 694.

differences were in style and the overall importance of the pacification activity in larger operational plans.

The style differences are easier to pinpoint. The Combined Action Platoons (CAP) was a long term commitment that was supposed to produce long term pacification gain. Stationing small groups of Marines in each village underscored America's long term commitment and allowed direct supervision and control over local forces. Army activities were less structured and not designed for long term prosecution. Local security and pacification arrangements were left at the discretion of local commanders. With the prosecution of the war, several larger initiatives were initiated, and they picked up speed with the creation of a central agency for managing pacification efforts, the CORDS, in 1967. In broad terms, US Army units performed direct civic action and security missions near their own bases, provided training to ARVN formation with battalion and brigade pairings, and lastly operated in Mobile Assistance and Training Teams (MATT) to embed US personnel in RVN village security forces on a short time basis to provide training, equipment, and initial leadership.

On the surface the CAP program was considerably superior. It was a more structured approach and allowed for greater support and guidance for the local forces. It was also based on sound historical precedents, namely the various National Guards set up by the USMC in the Caribbean nations. Still, despite its advantages, the CAP program misfired. Marines assigned to the Combined Action Platoons suffered more casualties than their local counterparts, no CAP was able to leave its village and move to the next, and, despite the claims to the

contrary, the resources necessary to fully implement the CAP programs were simply enormous. CAP failures have a host of explanations, from the variable quality of CAP volunteers, to the lack of interest of local forces, to the indifferent quality of indigenous leadership. The CAP program also overlooked the limited nature of the US intervention. As early as 1966 President Johnson had offered a reciprocal withdrawal of US forces to Hanoi. The effect of an American withdrawal on a security apparatus completely dependent on US participation would have been catastrophic.

While these explanations all had some justifications the larger reason had been largely ignored by CAP supporters. The main security threat was not represented by lightly armed guerrillas operating in small bands but large enemy units. In such a case, CAP's own resources were inadequate to assure any degree of security to the villages or their own compounds. At the end of the line the survival of the CAP depended on artillery, airpower, and prompt reaction forces. The availability of these items depended on the few Marines in the CAP who had access to radio and III MAF frequencies. Physical and equipment differences made them easy targets in fire fights. In an episode that has entered Marine lore, the defence of the hamlet of Binh Ngiah on 14 September 1966, a strong force of VC and PAVN forces attacked a small CAP position manned by 6 Marines, 10 members of RVN Popular Forces, and 2 policemen. The attack happened during a rain storm in the night preventing air and artillery support. The small outpost was almost overrun. The tale has become a legend, with several heroic wounded Marines repelling the assault and volunteers arriving the following day

to the village to rebuild the outpost. Still, the episode is a stark example of the basic truth of the ability of communist forces to get rid of unwanted CAP quite easily. In another celebrated and controversial action, the defence of Khe Sanh village in January 1968, the CAP played a minor role against a force that the local US Army District Advisor, Captain Bruce Clark, estimated as an infantry regiment. In this instance airpower was instrumental in stopping the attack. The sad truth was that while the CAPs improved local security in the village in which they were stationed, they never exerted the strategic effect the III MAF and General Walt hoped for.

Despite the common criticism that MACV was paying inordinate attention to big enemy formations, the available data from the area where MACV was making its main effort, the III CTZ, shows that large operations had improved the prospects for pacification.⁴⁴⁹ In 1967 US units in the III CTZ conducted 40 percent fewer large operations than in 1966 all with a combat force that was increasing exponentially. By the end of 1967, the III CTZ had 2 full infantry divisions, 1st and 25th, the bulk of another, 9th, and a full Cavalry Regiment, 11th, as opposed to just two divisions at the start of the year. Small operations increased by 25 percent in the same year.⁴⁵⁰ By the same token, in 1966 the III MAF devoted 35 percent of its resources to conventional operations against large enemy units. By the end of 1967, this percentage had risen to around 90%.⁴⁵¹ It also useful to note that the greatest stride in pacification occurred in the period 1969-1971, after the Tet

⁴⁴⁹ Telfer, et al, 'Fighting the North Vietnamese', p. 81; AAR Opn MALHEUR, 1st BDE, 101st ABN Div, pp. 13,15, Encl 4, pp. 3-4, RG 472, NARA.

⁴⁵⁰ MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', p. 143.

⁴⁵¹ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 400.

Offensive and the concomitant massive defeat of enemy conventional formations. When he left Vietnam,

Westmoreland bequeathed to Abrams an apparently weakened foe, a vast logistics network to give U.S. forces mobility and firepower, and a growing South Vietnamese Army which, to the private surprise of its own leaders, had held up rather well at Tet.⁴⁵²

Even accepting that General Walt was right to make pacification a priority over the conventional aspects of the war, his implementation of this concept was faulty. He never articulated how the population would have been won over to the Allied cause. While helpful, civic action and economic assistance never proved a decisive measure. Despite the impressive scale of American aid, it did not miraculously turn the population towards the government; even the vaunted Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP) was less effective than hoped.⁴⁵³ Communist atrocities and overall military successes were more effective in persuading individuals to give up the struggle against the RVN government.⁴⁵⁴ While the CAP program was supposed to have been shaped from the 'Banana Wars', it failed to take into account that aggressive military actions (patrols, sweeps, raids and destruction of enemy camps) had turned the tide in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua.

⁴⁵² Peter Braestrup, The Abrams Strategy in Vietnam, *New Leader* 9 June 1969, p. 4.

⁴⁵³ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 398; Raymond Bishop, *Medical support of Stability Operations: A Vietnam Case Study* (Student Paper, Army War College, 1969) pp. 12, 22, 25-34; Neel Spurgeon, *Medical support of the US Army in Vietnam, 1965-1970*, (US Army 1973), pp. 162-168.

⁴⁵⁴ A summary of Lessons Learned, attached to Memo, Norton DCG, USARV 22 Sep 65; ORLL 1 Aug-31 Oct 1966 25th Inf Div, pp. 24-25.

It was the wrong appreciation of the threat caused by enemy regular forces that condemned Marine pacification to failure rather than a supposed opposition from Saigon. Refusing to have at least a regimental size force available for contingencies in the entire area of operations meant that credible PAVN operations were bound to divert the focus from pacification to conventional war. While the idea of assigning as much force as possible to actual operations and not leaving forces idle was not wrong, per se, it created a series of unplanned consequences that in the end reduced the number of units available. To a certain extent, Walt's strategy was self-defeating because it failed to introduce variables, like enemy initiatives, into the formula. Ignoring MACV direction, the III MAF essentially postulated a static environment rather than a dynamic one.⁴⁵⁵ If the pacification focus was really critical to the final result of the war, it would have been obvious that diverting resources from this task would have become the main goal of the enemy which would mean mounting credible threats that could not be ignored by the Marines. Not having devised a way to deal with these threats without shuffling engaged units meant that each enemy diversion was bound to succeed in their diversionary purpose even if their operational goals were thwarted. Walt's decision was made against a backdrop of warnings from MACV on the effectiveness of enemy large units.⁴⁵⁶

The last great weakness was that Marine pacification was an end in and of itself.

Army pacification was just a single arrow in the quiver of measures MACV

⁴⁵⁵ Headquarters United States Marine Corps, Force Requirements and Long Range Estimates for I Corps Republic of Vietnam, 1966, USMC History Collection.

⁴⁵⁶ Shumlinson, 'Expanding War', p. 13; Westmoreland, 'Soldier's Report', pp. 165-166; Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', pp. 399-400; Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, Comments on draft MS, dtd 27May78, Vietnam Comment File; BGen William E. DePuy, ACS J-3, memo to Gen Westmoreland, dtd 15Nov65, Subj : The Situation in I Corps, DePuy Papers, CMH.

employed in fighting the war. Also the Marines had put too many assumptions in their own focus that were not based on real, hard intelligence data. III MAF pacification could have produced strategic results only if General Krulak was correct in his assumptions on the PAVN and VC regulars being defeated and supplied by internal resources. The fact that he was still advocating these assumption in 1967 when they had been already proved wrong is significant. Intelligence reaching the III MAF in late 1965 was pointing out that supplies were in large part received from the DRV and not from local sources.⁴⁵⁷ While food was still procured locally, large enemy units had the ability to procure their own food with a variety of means including coercion if left unchecked. The idea that ‘there was no virtue at all in seeking out the NVA in the mountains and jungle; that so long as they stayed there they were a threat to nobody...’⁴⁵⁸, while perfectly in line with COIN orthodoxy, was not applicable to Vietnam. By the simple virtue of their own presence these large units exercised a direct influence on local allegiance and put every pacification project at risk. It also overlooked the problem of dealing with these forces when they left their own mountain and jungle hideouts. While engaging them in the wilderness allowed unrestricted use of Allied firepower, engaging them in the populated areas only increased the suffering of the local population. Until these units were destroyed or neutralized, security for the coastal lowlands would have been a chimera. Despite Krulak’s callous approach to regular forces, the entire pacification campaign rested on the ability of the III MAF to deal with them.

⁴⁵⁷ III MAF COMMAND CHRONOLOGY, 01 December 1965-31 December 1965, Folder 002, USMC History Collection.

⁴⁵⁸ LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May78], Vietnam Comment File.

8.3 Sealing the borders

If the III MAF would have been capable of swiftly dealing with conventional offensives, even the lack of a proper strategic model would not have been a crippling factor. The lack of the expected strategic success of the CAP program was coupled with the inability to prevent free infiltration from Laos and North Vietnam.⁴⁵⁹

The situation in III MAF TAOR in December 1967 with the benefit of knowing both sides' dispositions clearly shows that, while the 3rd Marine Division was barely holding on to the DMZ and the northern part of the western border, the A Shau Valley was completely uncovered. It was the A Shau Valley which was used to infiltrate the PAVN forces that attacked Hue. While III MAF insistence on a pacification centric approach had reduced VC forces near coastal areas, the bulk of combat power for the Tet offensive in I CTZ came not from VC but from PAVN formations. To a certain extent MACV's overbearing insistence on holding the DMZ and Khe Sanh had indeed shielded Quang Tri, but, owing to Walt's lack of interest for the piedmont and the valleys and a lack of troops, the decision to virtually ignore the A Shau Valley after the loss of the Special Forces camp in January 1966 had left Hue unprotected. Furthermore the overextension of Marine infantry battalions had left the III MAF without any real reserve until US

⁴⁵⁹ Even Krulak had reversed his attitude on the PAVN and campaigned for decisive action against North Vietnam; DDRS DOD 1986, 000656 pp. 15-20; FMFPAC, 'Strategic Appraisal', pp. 15-16.

Army units deployed to the two provinces in January 1968. In December 1967 the overall operational situation was not favourable. The III MAF was not winning its conventional war any more than its pacification war.

There were several factors that conspired to create this less than satisfactory situation in 1967. Hennessy attributed the lack of success to a lack of military resources available.⁴⁶⁰ Military resources, particularly combat troops, were certainly a problem in the I CTZ. There were never sufficient Marine battalions to do everything. The official history complained that by 1967 there were no more reserves except units already in the field that could have been helicopter transported in case of an emergency.⁴⁶¹ According to the assistant commander of the 3rd Marine Division, Brigadier General Metzger, even Westmoreland was aware of the acute shortage of combat troops.⁴⁶² While it is indeed true that the III MAF was overstretched and needed more forces, it is also true that the refusal to keep reserves available with the exception of the odd refitting battalion or the available SLFs played into the hands of PAVN initiatives.

Intelligence was another factor. III MAF complained about lack of intelligence and wanted to engage in major operations only when sound intelligence was available.⁴⁶³ Still, intelligence about large enemy concentrations was ignored or disbelieved if not coming from III MAF organic resources. Even hard intelligence coming from III MAF assets was not accepted if it did not conform to Walt's assumptions. While it has been claimed that General Walt was playing with

⁴⁶⁰ Hennessy, 'Strategy', p. 187.

⁴⁶¹ Telfer, Rogers, & Fleming, 'Fighting the North Vietnamese', p. 75.

⁴⁶² Lt Gen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft MS, n.d. (1981), Vietnam Comment Files.

⁴⁶³ FMFPAC, 'Strategi Appraisal', p. 15.

intelligence because he refused to be diverted from his pacification focus, it is difficult to understand how ignoring detailed and solid intelligence on enemy movements could have helped III MAF at all.

A further reason that filters down from several statements made by both Krulak and Walt is that the III MAF and FMFPC were not overly concerned by PAVN capabilities. In such a framework sealing the borders was not important. PAVN units, in theory, could have been dealt with easily everywhere. The PAVN proved itself a much more difficult adversary than the two generals thought. Tactically speaking it is difficult to endorse Krulak and, especially, Walt's comments. Dealing with the PAVN was a resource intensive process in terms of both manpower and firepower. Dealing with the PAVN inside populated areas was a process inviting massive collateral damage.⁴⁶⁴ On this basis, keeping the PAVN outside the RVN's borders appeared to be a strong military and political necessity.

Despite that consideration, III MAF and MACV appeared to have never reached a consensus on the real extent of the threat posed by PAVN divisions across the DMZ or the Laotian border. General Walt seems to have always rejected the notion of a full scale infiltration from these areas out of hand. Later, General Cushman at least followed MACV directions for the sake of command harmony. For them and for their supporters the incursions from the DMZ and from Laos were just diversions designed to remove Marines from the coastal lowlands.

⁴⁶⁴ MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', p. 314.

While General Westmoreland was deeply aware of the political consequences of an invasion of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, he also maintained that it was a diversion; the same interpretation was provided by the CIA.⁴⁶⁵ What both MACV and CIA agreed was that, while a diversionary threat, it remained credible. The CIA assessment of the situation reinforced its highlighting of the threat noting that in the northern I CTZ PAVN formations achieved their greatest level of success with an attrition ratio at 'least as favourable' than those in other parts of South Vietnam.⁴⁶⁶

While both sides of the debate had their reasons, it is clear the PAVN was, indeed, mounting large scale operations in the area. Not responding with sufficient resources would have endangered the whole of the I Corps Tactical Zone area. The CIA analysis of Hanoi's intentions and infiltrations noted that their actions in Quang Tri province in 1966 and 1967 represented a major effort.⁴⁶⁷ The same report also underlined the fact that the attrition rate against US forces operating in proximity of the DMZ was more favourable than the rate experienced by PAVN and VC formations in the II and III CTZ areas. Furthermore the I CTZ was the only area where significant political and population targets were easily reachable for the communist side. With the defeat of the 1965 Fall offensive in the Central Highlands and the flow of American combat formations into the II CTZ, even in the central portion of South Vietnam the major enemy concentrations were pushed away from populated areas. Only in the I CTZ, especially in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, major urban centres were

⁴⁶⁵ MSG Westmoreland to Sharp 8 Aug 1967; CIA, 'Communist Build Up', pp. 2, 7, 9.

⁴⁶⁶ CIA, 'Communist Build Up', p. 7.

⁴⁶⁷ CIA, 'Communist Build Up', pp. 10-11.

threatened by direct military attacks. In 1967 Quang Tri city prison was raided, the only major raid in a provincial capital for the year. The Tet Offensive demonstrated that only in the I CTZ communist forces were able to threaten major urban centres; Hue was actually taken which clearly demonstrated the enemy had the capability to perform such an action. Defending these major cities was a primary responsibility for MACV and III MAF. Still, the III MAF had to be virtually coaxed to deploy forces near the DMZ in 1966 despite the obvious threat to Quang Tri. No effort from MACV or the I ARVN Corps could force them to take an interest in A Shau. So, the 325C PAVN division emerged from A Shau in January 1968 to strike at Hue.⁴⁶⁸ The Battle for Hue represented a sort of anathema for the Allied cause. Even if the city was retaken, the cost in collateral damage and friendly casualties was so high that another similar occurrence would not have been politically acceptable.⁴⁶⁹

Both Walt and Krulak had based their operational approach on the assumption the III MAF would have effectively and swiftly thwarted PAVN initiatives once the North Vietnamese soldiers had left their mountain enclaves. Yet the operational record of two years of independent operations of the III MAF did not support this claim. Marine operations were not inexpensive, and, if battles had to be joined in the middle of the populated area, the additional cost was horrifying. Westmoreland's idea of engaging the enemy in its base areas was certainly more sound. Regimental and division commanders of the III MAF often erred on MACV's side by launching attacks on the communists' base areas to reduce

⁴⁶⁸ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 34.

⁴⁶⁹ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 37.

pressure on pacification, but there was no coherent plan to secure some sort of battle zone between the coastal lowlands and the enemy sanctuaries. Such initiatives also required more troops than the III MAF had available. Furthermore, MACV's insistence on keeping some sort of border defences in place exacerbated, in the III MAF view, the overall troop shortage. Walt resisted both the McNamara line and the commitment of troops to Khe Sanh on the basis that it was diluting III MAF resources available for the main battle area. According to him, a mobile defence would have sufficed to keep major enemy units out of the populated areas.⁴⁷⁰ This view has been persuasive and several historians and retired officers have endorsed it.⁴⁷¹ Historian John Prados even argued that III MAF effectively ignored real human intelligence collected by Special Forces and Marine Force Recon Teams on the enemy build-up in Laos to avoid dealing with the problem.⁴⁷² Lieutenant Colonel Colby hinted at similar influences over the effort of his reconnaissance team before operation HASTINGS. Still, no III MAF planning document delineates how the III MAF would have responded to enemy moves except by moving scarce infantry battalions already allocated to other tasks. Furthermore, the idea that PAVN units could be effectively and inexpensively defeated anywhere is open to debate.

First, there is the CIA contention about attrition rates made in 1967.⁴⁷³ It calls into question III MAF optimism over engaging PAVN formations. Walt preferred to tell everyone how soundly the enemy had been beaten. Yet, after more or less

⁴⁷⁰ Telfer, et al, 'Fighting the North Vietnamese', p. 87; CMC debriefing at FMFPac Headquarters, 11 January 1967, CMC files, USMC History Division; MACV msg 09101 to CinCpac, 18Mar67, Westmoreland Papers, CMH.

⁴⁷¹ Coan, 'Con Thien', p. 22.

⁴⁷² Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', 2004, p. 77.

⁴⁷³ CIA, 'Communist Build Up', p. 7.

short periods of refit, PAVN formations were again engaging the Marines. HASTINGS was followed by PRAIRIE, PRAIRIE by HICKORY and so on, the target being always Division 324B. In other parts of the I CTZ the situation was similar. PAVN and VC units were bloodied but, due to political restrictions, always allowed to recuperate. In a seemingly incongruous stance Walt acknowledged to have begged for permission to invade Laos.⁴⁷⁴ This seemingly never ending cycle repeated itself from Operation STARLITE in 1965 onward. Walt's assertion also belittled the difficulties experienced by Marines engaged in combat against PAVN units. Certainly General Westmoreland was not impressed by Walt's overconfidence stating, 'I gained the impression that the Marines in their supreme self-confidence, however admirable that might be, were underestimating the enemy capabilities.'⁴⁷⁵

While the disaster of the "Marketplace Massacre" at the opening of Operation BUFFALO happened after General Cushman took command of the III MAF, it was a product of the unresolved contradictions of General Walt's tenure. Assessing Operation BUFFALO and the Marketplace Massacre also leads to questioning the operational and tactical efficacy of III MAF operations. When 1/9 Marines was engaged near Con Thien there were no real reserves. The Northern Area reserve battalion, 3/9 Marines, was under strength and scattered. Until two SLFs were committed, the entire 3rd Marine Division had no available reinforcements. 1/9 had just been left hanging out in the DMZ without any real support. In

⁴⁷⁴ Prados & Stubbe, 'Valley', 2004, p. 50.

⁴⁷⁵ Westmoreland, 'Soldier Reports', p. 198.

comparison, during their first massive foray in the DMZ area, operation HASTINGS, the 3rd Marine Division employed five battalions of their own supported by 4 ARVN battalions.

While many complainants over the Strong-Point Obstacle System (SPOS) concept at the base of the McNamara line had been made, both at the time and in contemporary literature, it is difficult to see how a more flexible defence scheme could have been implemented for the DMZ. It is true that the construction tasks fixated the bulk of the 3rd Marine Division and a consistent part of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division on the DMZ, but it is also true that the exodus of Marine battalions north was prompted by ever increasing enemy activity which would have happened anyway for reasons not connected with the McNamara line.⁴⁷⁶ With both Allied and communist sources now stating that it was Hanoi's intention to mount large scale activity across the DMZ, the shift to the north of 3rd Marine Division resources would have occurred even without the SPOS.

Even the increase in casualties along the DMZ could not directly be blamed on the barrier concept. PAVN artillery would have shelled Marine positions anyway. It is worth noting that the two combat bases that received the bulk of PAVN shelling during 1967, Con Thien and Gio Linh, were established in 1966 before the SPOS concept was created. Any operation along and into the DMZ needed strong points in support, and the selection of Con Thien and Gio Linh was dictated by sound military reasoning, namely their location and elevation

⁴⁷⁶ CIA, 'Communist Build Up', pp. 7, 10-11.

allowing unobstructed line of sight for observation and artillery support. At the same time their main advantage, height in an almost featureless plain, made them prime targets for artillery shelling. I strongly doubt that the defence of these outposts would have required less troops in the absence of the barrier. After April 1967, when MACV finally obtained authorization for artillery fire into and north of the DMZ, Con Thien became a focal point in the battle for the DMZ.⁴⁷⁷ The PAVN would have tried to overrun that combat base in any case forcing the 3rd Marine Division to react with reinforcements. Also the defence of Con Thien and Gio Linh would have still forced the garrisons of these outposts to mount constant patrolling and thus start combat actions like the one on 2 July 1967. To a certain extent engineering tasks conducted in conjunction with the construction of the barrier, namely vegetation clearing and the construction of reinforced bunkers, actually marginally improved Marine operations providing both less concealment for the PAVN and more artillery resistant cover for the Marines themselves.

Yet, while certainly less detrimental than usually portrayed, it is difficult not to agree with General Cushman's view of the barrier. Using his words: 'it was a *stupid* concept'.⁴⁷⁸ The DMZ was not used for infiltration but for large scale military operations. The barrier, in every incarnation, was not supposed to stop large scale assaults; it had to be backed up by an increased number of combat formations for that purpose. The simple answer is that, barring an additional massive commitment of troops to the DMZ, there was no alternative to

⁴⁷⁷ Col Richard B. Smith, "Leatherneck Square," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 83, No. 8 (Aug 69), p. 35.

⁴⁷⁸ General Robert E. Cushman, Comment on draft ms. 17May81 Vietnam Comment Files.

effectively defend the DMZ and protect Quang Tri except through a prolonged slugging infantry match with the concomitant immobilization of III MAF resources and attendant list of casualties. The only other possibility would have been to entrust the defence to mobile forces, either airmobile or armoured/mechanized, backed by extensive firepower.

This is what happened after the Tet Offensive. The defence of the DMZ was taken over by the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) and by the 101st Airborne Division. Increased mobility and firepower allowed US units to effectively keep the enemy off balance. US Army operations tended to produce more favourable results in terms of enemy to friendly casualty ratio than Marine battles. Similar ratios were also obtained by USMC units from 1968 onward.⁴⁷⁹

While casualty ratios have been subjected to extensive debate, it should be noted that in the two provinces used as a case study the combat operations that generated those ratios occurred largely in unpopulated areas reducing civilian casualties. The PAVN, by its own admission, always had problems in dealing with large airmobile and mechanized formations. Mobility, be it generated by helicopters, armoured vehicles or riverine vessels permitted US forces to control the pace of tactical engagements. In Quang Tri the mechanized forces of the 1st Brigade, 5th Division were able to roam freely in the eastern part of the DMZ while the 1st Cavalry Division and the 101st Airborne division used their own organic helicopters to scour the mountain areas of the I CTZ much more effectively than the III MAF. In 1968 General Chaisson, USMC, estimated that it would have required the full helicopter complement of the III MAF to bring a

⁴⁷⁹ Shulimson & Johnson, 'Landing', pp. 757-759.

sizeable force into the A Shau Valley as desired by MACV.⁴⁸⁰ Instead of the Marines he suggested an airmobile division, the 1st Cavalry.

8.4 Rich man Army, poor man Marine Corps?

The Army units that marched into Thua Thien and Quang Tri in the late fall of 1967, while clad in the same olive drab of the USMC, were an altogether different force. Several key factors separated them from the Marines. The army had maintained brigade and regimental organization as far as possible in Vietnam. While 'Reorganization Objective Army Division' (ROAD) formations were supposed to pool their battalions together and then attach them to field brigades, in practice, battalions had been operating with the same brigade commands increasing coordination and "corporate" memory.⁴⁸¹ US Army infantry battalions were smaller than their Marine counterparts. Official Tables of Organization and Equipment authorized only three rifle companies, smaller than Marine companies, but, by the end of 1967, the majority of infantry battalions in Vietnam had moved to a new, officially sanctioned, Modified TO&E devised for Vietnam realities with a fourth, smaller, rifle company added to provide for base defence which freed the other three companies for manoeuvre operations.

US Army units also enjoyed better equipment allowances and greater mechanization. Several US Army infantry battalions were fully mechanized and

⁴⁸⁰ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 38

⁴⁸¹ ROAD divisions replaced the failed PENTOMIC divisions starting in 1961. Wilson, 'Maneuver and Firepower', pp. 293-301.

several armoured (tank) battalions were operating in Vietnam. Unique to the US Army were also the Armoured Cavalry Regiments and Squadrons, a powerful mix of tanks and other mechanized vehicles that were used to perform road security, escort reaction and highly mobile operations. Artillery support was plentiful. Each brigade had its own permanently attached artillery battalion from its parent division equipped with 105mm howitzers for immediate support; division and corps general support battalions were equipped with 155mm, 175mm and 8" howitzers to provide heavier support.

An additional advantage enjoyed by the US Army was air mobility on an unprecedented scale. If the Marines had pioneered helicopters after Korea, their own program was dwarfed by the capabilities displayed by the US Army in Vietnam. The Army helicopter advantage was both technical and organizational. On a technical level, the US Army had been rewarded by its faith in the UH-1 program. The variants of the UH-1 Huey (or Iroquois) utility helicopter operating in Vietnam were markedly superior to the USMC UH-34 in both performance and payload, and they afforded more flexibility and less vulnerability than the CH-46. The ability to carry a full squad as opposed to the five or six men allowed in the UH-34 reduced both the number of helicopters required to lift a given number of combat units and the time required to reorganize after landing. In several occasions the need to reorganize squads and platoons after a helicopter assault had left Marine units vulnerable to enemy reaction.⁴⁸² The Huey's speed, greater

⁴⁸² While the technical data of the UH1 and CH34 did not differ operations in Vietnam show that the CH34 was underpowered and rarely able perform as advertised. In addition even the heavier CH46 suffered problems. Earlier versions were unable to lift more than one squad in normal

engine power and manoeuvrability reduced vulnerability to enemy fire and often allowed damaged helicopters to limp to safety after being hit reducing aircraft losses and human casualties. Notwithstanding technical advantage, the sheer numbers of Army helicopters provided greater operational flexibility. Two US Army divisions, the 1st Cavalry and 101st Airborne, both also employed in the I CTZ, had sufficient helicopters to airlift their entire infantry and artillery complement and logistical support giving unmatched ability to react fast and operate in areas where Marine units had faced serious mobility and logistical problems.⁴⁸³

This lavish provision of firepower and mobility generated different approaches to combat operations between the US Army and US Marines. The Army was emphasizing speed of action while the Marines emphasized a more steady approach, yet both depended heavily on their attached firepower rather than on their organic strength to overwhelm the enemy.⁴⁸⁴ While this contributed to a popular image of an Army rather callous in using its available firepower, the same comment often having been applied to the Marines. Still, despite this negative popular image, MACV also had strived to harness its firepower in ways designed to reduce collateral damage. Rules of engagement were strict, and artillery and air strikes close to villages were subjected to convoluted authorization procedures. Despite these attempts to reduce the collateral effect of firepower, the war had evolved into a firepower contest because of its

conditions. Upgraded version only appeared in 1969. General Raymond G. Davis interview, 2 Feb 1977, p.20, Oral HistColl, USMC History Division.

⁴⁸³ Zaffiri, 'Hamburger Hill', p. 38.

⁴⁸⁴ Wilikins, 'Grab their Belt', p. 214; James McCoy, *Secrets of the Vietcong*, (New York: Hyppocrene 1992), pp. 220-221; Robert Scales, *Firepower in Limited War* (New York: Presidio 1998), p. 74.

escalation. This evolution had only reinforced the Army's determination to take the offensive and engage enemy regular forces far away from populated areas where firepower could be deployed with fewer restrictions. Yet, even if employment of firepower had been a critical part of MACV operations, they were not, as asserted by some critics, driven by firepower. Offensive operations in enemy base areas had been conducted to reduce enemy activity in populated areas. Despite their negative portrayal, 'Search and Destroy' operations were a critical part of MACV COIN strategy as previously discussed. When forced to operate close to population centres, US Army units tried to devise operational and tactical methods to reduce the necessity of employing overwhelming firepower as in Operation CEDAR FALLS in 1967.⁴⁸⁵ This solution had proven reasonably successful in II, III and IV CTZ. While not perfect, by 1967 enemy large scale activity had been reduced to a manageable level especially in the critical III CTZ around Saigon allowing for the reduction in large operations and employment of fire support.⁴⁸⁶

Despite successes in the III CTZ, MACV still focused its effort on the threat posed by large PAVN formations and the dangers of underestimating them. When in the Fall of 1967 the elite 173rd Airborne Brigade moved from the then relatively quiet III CTZ to the central highlands in the area of Dak To, officers of the 4th Infantry Division responsible for the sectors were horrified by what they perceived as overreliance on small unit tactics against regular forces.⁴⁸⁷ The

⁴⁸⁵ OPLAN 58-66, OPN Cedar Falls II FFV, 12 Dec 1966, Historians Files, CMH.

⁴⁸⁶ MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', p. 143; Office of Assistant Secretary of Defence (SA), South East Asia Analysis Rpt, control no. 6-608, Sep 67, pp 10-12.

⁴⁸⁷ Col. James B. Adamson, quoted in Murphy, 'Dak To' pp. 48-49.

paratroopers paid for their overconfidence with severe casualties in their first encounters during the Battle of Dak To.⁴⁸⁸ The actions only reinforced the idea that only large operations offered sufficient security to tackle PAVN units head on.

This reliance on mobility, offensive and concentrated firepower put the US Army officers often at odds with their Marine counterparts. When elements of Task Force Oregon, a provisional division sized formation made up of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, one brigade from the 25th Infantry Division, one from the 101st Airborne Division, and other assorted units, arrived at Chu Lai in the first half of 1967, they found the Marines more interested in fixed defences and protecting their own installations than engaging the enemy.⁴⁸⁹ Defensive works at Chu Lai were judged excessive and were in large part demolished.⁴⁹⁰ Task Force Oregon operations in the southern half of the I CTZ supported the Army contention that mobile operations were more effective than static security in keeping large enemy units away from the local population. Still, the scale of resources available to Task Force Oregon was completely different than those of the former Chu Lai Defense Command created by the 1st Marine Division.

The same difference in the scale of resources was readily felt in Thua Thien and Quang Tri. In 1968 the US Army changed the shape of the war in these two provinces by the sheer weight of the resources moved. The III MAF was able to switch from static defence to more mobile operations due to the availability of

⁴⁸⁸ Murphy, 'Dak To', p. 49.

⁴⁸⁹ ORLL, 18 Feb-30 Apr 67, Task force Oregon, p.15; Interview of George MacGarrigle with General Rosson, 13 Sep 1967, referenced in MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', p. 229.

⁴⁹⁰ MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', p. 229.

these resources. While internal improvements like the introduction of upgraded helicopters with better performance were also effective, the bulk of the fighting power in the two northernmost provinces was supplied by Army formations. The Army assumed more and more importance with the gradual withdrawal of the 3rd Marine Division in 1969.

A strong difference in performance in direct combat against large enemy formations thus existed between the Marines and the Army. Despite the accolades awarded to Marine units, they tended to suffer more casualties in large battles. To a certain extent, Marine units faced unfavourable odds in the opening round of almost every important operation and thus suffered larger casualties. While this was not always true, the general pattern of Marine operations along the Laotian border and the DMZ is worth noting. In almost every initial engagement the Marines were outnumbered and outgunned, then reinforcements and additional assets quickly closed the gap but not before casualties were suffered. III MAF, especially during Walt's tenure, displayed a lack of flexibility in dealing with large units when they actually appeared. Marine operations were reactive rather than pre-emptive. USMC forces concentrated against a threat only after the enemy had been able to engage first. The result of this lack of pre-emption was that, in several cases, PAVN units were able to inflict considerable losses on Marine units as in Operation BUFFALO. In some instances III MAF even ignored intelligence allowing the PAVN to proceed with its own build up until the deployment of considerable III MAF resources was necessary as exemplified by operation VIRGINIA.

The only alternative to a bloody infantry match on the border would have been the reliance on more firepower intensive tactics using armoured formations and more artillery. That was the solution employed by the US Army when the 1st Brigade (Mechanized), 5th Infantry Division moved to the Quang Tri province. The US Army, despite an initial rejection of mounted operations, was becoming increasingly more effective in employing large mechanized formations on Vietnam. Yet the Marines, despite having considerable mechanized resources at their disposal, two tank battalions, two antitank battalions and two amphibious tractor battalions, never concentrated them. They simply contented themselves with employing armoured vehicles in small penny packets.⁴⁹¹

While some of the mechanized vehicles, namely the Ontos tank destroyers and the LTVP-5 amphibians, were not completely effective, the M48 tanks equipping the two tank battalions were perfectly capable of operating effectively in Vietnam as the US Army and, later, the ARVN demonstrated. The main reason for the lack of real USMC mechanized operations has to be located in its organizational and doctrinal approach. While the island battles of the Pacific War had elevated the role of the tank in the US Marine Corps, and Korea had confirmed its importance, the 'starving' years of the Eisenhower administration and the focus of the Corps on air mobility and helicopters had left its armoured component neglected and under-resourced. Between 1953 and 1965 the tank battalions had been left in a limbo, even being removed from division control in 1957 with only the 3rd Marine Division in Japan retaining a divisional tank

⁴⁹¹ Estes, 'Under Armor', pp. 166,169, 170.

battalion.⁴⁹² More important was the dearth of operational training and cooperation with the infantry. Marine officers' attendance at basic and advanced armour courses at the US Army Fort Knox Armor School declined, and, in 1958, the courses were even omitted from the USMC Schools catalogue.⁴⁹³ Tank-infantry exercises were rare, scripted and not overly realistic when they were held at all; between 1961 and 1963 the 3rd Marine Tank Battalion at Okinawa was virtually inactive with all its tanks having being dead-lined for lack of spares.⁴⁹⁴

This lack of training and widespread familiarity with the potential of armoured vehicles relegated the Marine tanks to static security roles for the majority of the conflict. The popular saying of the Marine tankers in Vietnam was 'two on the ridge, three on the bridge' referring to the two sections (of respectively two and three tanks) comprising a Marine tank platoon. Deployment in penny packets not only hampered tactical usage but placed a greater strain on maintenance activities resulting in more and more vehicles dead-lined or lacking reliability in combat thus reinforcing the infantry perception that the tanks were indeed a liability. While tank fire often received praise in AARs, every time a tank was damaged or simply broke down it became a liability. When mechanized sweeps were attempted, the numbers involved were so small that single vehicle losses became critical. During the previously mentioned 'armoured push' in the DMZ

⁴⁹² Estes, 'Under Armor', p. 158.

⁴⁹³ The US Army was providing the bulk of advanced training for Marine tank officers, Marine schools providing only orientation training. Estes, 'Under Armor, 2000', p. 161.

⁴⁹⁴ Estes, 'Under Armor', p. 166, based on interviews with Robert C. McInteer and Charles J. Barone, 7 and 8 October 1998 respectively.

by the 2/9 Marines the loss of a single vehicle stalled the entire force.⁴⁹⁵ Marine tankers were bitter in complaining about the inability of infantry commanders to properly exploit the tanks or even follow basic tank-infantry team procedures.⁴⁹⁶ While attempts were made to create a single armoured reserve for the DMZ, it was never properly utilized being simply used in penny packet concentrations.⁴⁹⁷

This lack of interest in armoured operations contrasted with the Army's enthusiasm in similar operations. When US Army units were sent north in 1967, they took with them their own organic armoured assets as well as additional armoured units. In addition, the 1st Battalion, 1st Cavalry Regiment and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) were specifically sent to the I CTZ from the States. The 1st Brigade was specifically requested by MACV due to its nature as a mechanized formation. The basic idea was that mechanized units were able to almost match helicopter mobility and provided more firepower when engaged.⁴⁹⁸

8.5 External or Internal causes?

The 3rd Marine Division defended Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces practically alone for two years in 1966 and 1967. Of course there was the 1st ARVN Division stationed there, Vietnamese Airborne and Marines were moved there as

⁴⁹⁵ 2/9 Marines AAR Operation KINGFISHER in 2/9 ComC July 67; 9th Marines AAR Operation KINGFISHER in 9th Marines ComC July 67; Telfer, et al, 'Fighting the North Vietnamese', p. 127.

⁴⁹⁶ Gilbert, 'Tank Battles', 2007.

⁴⁹⁷ Task Force Robbie, was named after the ADC of the 3rd Marine Division and comprising one company of 3rd Tank Battalion, 2 US Army M42 Duster self-propelled antiaircraft guns and two army transportation companies with trucks carrying quadruple machine gun. Hardly a powerful armoured force.

⁴⁹⁸ Starry, 'Mounted Combat', p. 140; Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam (MACOV), p. 178, Historians Files, CMH.

required, and later on the 26th Marine Regiment was attached, but, for more than two years, the division was practically alone securing coastal enclaves, defending the border and supporting the local authorities. This mission had to be accomplished in the face of at least 4 PAVN divisions supported by heavy artillery, several independent regiments, and local guerrillas. It is thus no wonder that the 3rd Marine Division failed in its overall task to bring security to the region. While it held Khe Sanh and protected Quang Tri, it lost A Shau and allowed Hue to be attacked. Its pacification effort between 1965 and the end of 1967 did not achieve its planned goals. On the flipside a much stronger force with better support achieved impressive goals between 1968 and 1970. At face value, the Marines' lack of progress was just a consequence of a lack of resources. As Hennessy pointed out the III MAF never had the resources to carry out all its goals.⁴⁹⁹ The simple truth was that the III MAF could have pursued a conventional campaign or an all-out COIN effort, but it could not do both at the same time.

Yet this is a simplistic explanation and overlooks several problems. If resource availability and allocation had been the only problems, General Krulak would have been right. Ignoring the PAVN and concentrating on securing villages would have granted victory. But this did not happen in 1966 for the simple reason that ignoring the PAVN was not possible. The III MAF neglected the A Shau Valley, and, after the fall of the A Shau Special Forces camp, the PAVN used the valley to stage its attack on Hue. Providing security to villages in the face of PAVN conventional units was not a realistic proposition until these units had been

⁴⁹⁹ Hennessy, 'Strategy', p. 187.

removed. Because permanently destroying them was almost impossible, resources had to be dedicated to the purposes of at least constantly neutralizing them. If resources were limited, priorities had to be established. The 1965 MACV campaign plan did recognize the need for priorities both in terms of geography and objectives. When III MAF articulated its own strategy with its 1966 Campaign Plan, MACV priorities were replaced with III MAF ones. The differences between the priorities of these two campaign plans encapsulated the differences between the cultures of the two services.

It is doubtful that Greene, Krulak and Walt ignored the OIDP or the doctrinal effort spearheaded by the US Army. Yet they relied on the Small Wars Manual and on their own personal experience more than anything else, and they did not leave any real explanation for historians. Hennessy advanced the proposition that they decided that Vietnam required a different approach.⁵⁰⁰ This explanation is not satisfactory. They did not have sufficient experience in Vietnam to directly challenge MACV plans. Westmoreland was, at the time, the general officer with the longest experience in Vietnam. He knew the situation, the leadership, and had witnessed the collapse of the military situation first-hand; Lewis Walt had been away from East Asia since 1953. It also ignored the fact that MACV had shelved the OIDP official doctrine due to the changed situation on the ground. MACV's 1965 Campaign Plan was a departure from previous COIN doctrine moving from a mainly advisory effort to a direct role not fully envisioned in the OIDP. Also, tactical methods were not really different between the two services. What Hennessy did not take into consideration was

⁵⁰⁰ Hennessy, 'Strategy', pp. 78-79

strategic culture. If the emphasis on pacification is coupled with an under appreciation of the threats posed by communist regular forces and the basic requirement of Marine independence, a different reason emerges. Vietnam was a perfect opportunity to further the case of the Marines' independence. If the Marine methods could have been applied successfully and independently from the Army, Vietnam would have enhanced the reputation of the USMC to new levels. While this is a speculative answer, it fits with the scarce available documentation and has several precedents. It also fits with a service whose strategic culture placed organizational survival as the main objective.⁵⁰¹

The second problem was effectiveness. The III MAF did not have the appropriate resources to face the PAVN. The majority of commentators have always maintained that the Marines had the best strategic concept in Vietnam, but very few have examined the realities of combat operations. Hennessy, for example, pointed out that despite their efforts, the conventional campaign did not produce the results MACV had hoped for implying that these efforts were militarily effective but the strategy was flawed.⁵⁰² While Hennessy's claims are certainly true for the I CTZ, the situation in other parts of Vietnam is more difficult to assess. US Army operations in the III CTZ did materially affect the pacification campaign despite Hennessy's denials.⁵⁰³ Task Force Oregon operations did change the situation in the southern tip of the I CTZ just as the actions of the 1st Cavalry Division did change the situation in the northern II

⁵⁰¹ See Chapter 2; CGFMFPac, *Pacific Opns*, p. 12, USMC History Division.

⁵⁰² Hennessy, 'Strategy', pp. 111-112, 123-124.

⁵⁰³ MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', pp. 142-143.

CTZ.⁵⁰⁴ Army successes cast doubts on the III MAF performance especially in light of the comments by General Rosson when taking control of the Chu Lai enclave.⁵⁰⁵ Even more, the reversal of GVN fortunes in Thua Thien and Quang Tri provinces coincided with the massive introduction of US Army formations. The Marines lacked helicopters, tanks and mechanized vehicles to compensate for inferior numbers. While firepower and mobility could appear to be out of place in Vietnam, the reality was that they were needed to ensure quick response time, logistical sustainability, and successful resolution of enemy contacts.

Whatever the merits of the strategic debate, the reality was that the III MAF was an inappropriate tactical and operational instrument for the mission it was required to perform in Vietnam. Its lack of mobility and firepower hindered operations and had to be compensated for with the use of more and more resources. These deficiencies stemmed from choices made in the 1953-1965 period. In turn these choices resulted from precise strategic goals. Despite the romantic image presented by countless Marine publications, the III MAF in Vietnam emerged as a slow, pondering, and blundering entity. Its general officers operated in a vacuum using their own previous experiences from a different era and from different countries. South Vietnam was neither Shanghai nor Central America. The cultural inflexibility in the approach to the regular

⁵⁰⁴ MacGarrigle, 'Offensive', pp. 190, 242-243; AAR, Opn THAYER II, 1st Cav Div, p. 49, RG 472, NARA; HES Data Book, 1967, p. 11- 20, Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense, Systems Analysis (OASD SA), Historians files, CMH; AAR, Opn MALHEUR, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, pp. 13, 15, Inc14, pp. 3-4, RG 472, NARA.

⁵⁰⁵ MacGarrigle-Rosson interview.

North Vietnamese units critically impaired the III MAF pacification effort because the PAVN was free to target the pacification itself.⁵⁰⁶

In the end the Marine strategic culture blinded the III MAF to the critical threat posed by enemy conventional forces. Its emphasis on rapid deployment and lightness to support a strategic role for the USMC and in turn its long-term survival crippled its combat effectiveness. The fact that the majority of Marine general officers were coming from the ranks of infantry and not from other arms further reduced their appreciation for 'supporting' arms. It also blinded them to the need for balanced combat forces rather than a light infantry organization designed to move fast across the globe. Tanks proved more important than helicopters once battle was joined.⁵⁰⁷ This happened in a conflict where the enemy did not employ massed mechanized formations against the III MAF, but the concept had been designed to provide a fast strategic response to different levels of crisis including facing Soviet forces. This reflects rather poorly on the ability of the Marine leadership to foresee 'future' combat operations especially in the light of their own experiences in Korea and against the Imperial Japanese Army.

Operation VIRGINIA thus represented a fitting summary of the Marine culture and its practical effects on the war in Vietnam. The 1/1 Marines searched for the PAVN where the Special Forces did not place them, and then returned to the coast by walking along a collapsed road without any compelling military reason

⁵⁰⁶ OASD (SA), vol 1. Pp. 21-25; ORLL 18 Feb-30 Apr 67, TF OREGON, p. 20 indicates direct involvement of PAVN battalion sized units in village attacks.

⁵⁰⁷ Starry, 2002, p. 140.

for such a course of action. While it made a nice and heroic line in the official history, it did not accomplish anything except wasting good infantry.

South Vietnam was also not Malaya. While the US Army has been strongly criticized for introducing conventional units in Vietnam just to satisfy an inflexible strategic culture, a close examination of the situation does not support such a claim. In the years before Vietnam, the US Army displayed a surprisingly innovative strategic culture. The US Army was the first entity to try to assess the different requirements of land warfare in the 'nuclear era'. While not flawless and certainly self-interested, the US Army revealed itself sufficiently open-minded to explore different concepts of warfare. Limited warfare and counterinsurgency were not innovations created by President Kennedy and forced on a reluctant Army. The Army realized the dangers posed by such situations and tried to respond. Still, the bulk of its post Korean War doctrine failed in Vietnam. By late 1964 the essence of the ODP had been proven wrong or at least not applicable to Vietnam. Faced with an unplanned situation, MACV was forced to improvise. The resulting concept of operations was more successful than previously credited. In large part this success was a product of the US Army's culture. While Westmoreland and Abrams did not win the war, they created an improved military and security environment to be exploited. It was a reasonable limitation for a direct military intervention in an allied country. Furthermore, it was a limitation that had been recognized early on in the process of creation of doctrine even if it had been replaced later with the more ambitious goals.

In short using firepower was not a fault in the US Army Strategic Culture as being claimed frequently in previous accounts. Army critics tended to overlook the fact that the US intervention in Vietnam had been instigated by a conventional threat. The US build up did not take place in a vacuum; it was an answer to a communist build up. Firepower was the required answer. Even if firepower was an appropriate answer, MACV never lost sight of pacification even under Westmoreland's tenure.⁵⁰⁸ According to the review of national counterinsurgency capabilities produced in 1965 at President Johnson's behest only the Army and the Marines had taken steps to implement ODP recommendations.⁵⁰⁹ Furthermore, Westmoreland and Abrams never lost sight that the primary goal of the war was protecting the South Vietnamese population. While it has been claimed that during the early years this goal was an empty one, the statistics on US Army civic action and MEDCAP activities presents a different image. As soon he felt safe to do it, Westmoreland implemented several of the COIN oriented programs that were usually attributed to Abrams.⁵¹⁰

Both Westmoreland and Abrams were products of an Army culture that was successfully adapting to local situations. There was not a great divide between the bad Westmoreland and the good Abrams. On the other hand there were more differences between the three commanders the III MAF experienced

⁵⁰⁸ MACV Directive 525-4, 17 Sep 1965, p. 8; Msg Westmoreland to Sharp, 8 Jul 1967, pp. 5-16

⁵⁰⁹ Report Counterinsurgency Review Board, 1 Dec 1965.

⁵¹⁰ Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 390; in 1967 Westmoreland reported 40% of US units were assigned to area security; OASD (SA), Sep 67, sub: Southeast Asia Analysis Report, pp. 10-12 and Nov 67, same subject pp. 54-56, Historian Files, CMH; MACV Directive 525-4, 17 Sep 1965, p. 8. Lewis Sorley, *The Quiet War: Revolutionary Development*, 1967, *Military Review* vol. 47 no. 11 (1967), p. 14.

during the period discussed. Cushman and Nickerson produced a much more flexible organization than Walt. III MAF priorities changed more than MACV ones between 1965 and 1970. By late 1967 even Krulak had changed some of his stances. One of the advantages of a lack of formal doctrine in the USMC was the ability to improvise and adapt and easily discard failing theoretical models. Generals Cushman and Nickerson were able to switch to a high mobility intensive campaign once the III MAF fell in line with MACV's overall campaign plan. Still, even if Cushman and Nickerson proved willing to follow MACV's lead as a military organization, the III MAF was not able to change quickly enough. The long term effects of the light infantry focus generated by the strategic priorities of the Marine Corps did not allow for great flexibility in the field. The 1st and 3rd Marine Divisions were simply not capable of reorganizing themselves or remedying their lack of mechanization and combined arms training. Furthermore, the imbalanced helicopter structure of the Marine Corps as overly reliant on medium and heavy transport helicopters rather than on smaller and more manoeuvrable utility ones could not be changed overnight. It is worth noting that by 1968 the bulk of the operations of the III MAF in the Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces was carried out by the 1st Cavalry, 101st Airborne and, later, by the 1st Brigade, 5th Division, all US Army formations.

If a fault in the US Army strategic culture emerged from this partial analysis of its Vietnam experience, it was the inability to fit its doctrine and objective into the larger framework of inter-agency cooperation and national strategy. While recognizing that limited wars and insurgencies required a combined politico-

military approach, the US Army and its officers stopped short of invading the field of national strategy. Non-military activities were always conceived and pursued to attain localized military goals. Yet this critique could also be applied to the US Marine Corps. To a certain extent it is also a spurious criticism. Despite all the emphasis in economic development and progress in the ODP, a military intervention in an allied country would have been executed only if the local government failed to stem an insurgency or a third party intervened. Even if social engineering was the core of US overseas policy in the formative period of the American intervention in Vietnam, it was also something the US government or its agencies, civilian and military, had no control over. It was the realm of local governments with their own agendas. In the end Ambassador Robert Komer realized that this ideological assumption was faulty and any form of pacification required intensive manpower, constant effort, and, in the end, destroying enemy forces.⁵¹¹ Security was the product of the destruction of the enemy not vice versa as championed by Krulak in the early years.

Both services invested heavily in new and unproven technology and ideas. While the helicopters largely paid off, the reliance on economic and material aid did not produce the sweeping results that social scientists and planners had hoped. In the end both services were unable to 'win' the war in Vietnam in a way acceptable to the internal public opinion and to several of their critics. Yet, by the end of 1970, they achieved a sort of favourable balance of forces in Vietnam. This balance was more a product of the approach championed by MACV. In the

⁵¹¹ Robert Komer press Conference, quoted in Peter Braestrup, *The Big Story: how the american Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, (Garden City: Anchor Press 1978), pp. 405-410.

end, even the USMC was forced to change its largely incoherent strategy. Furthermore, it was the result of the application of solutions largely at odds with perceived orthodoxy and shaped by experience rather than theory. Westmoreland's opposition to breaking down US forces at a village and hamlet level stemmed from practical experience rather than a supposed love affair with large units. Hennessy and Krepinevich both maintain that Westmoreland's reliance on large combat operations stemmed from Army culture rather than necessity.⁵¹² Hennessy argues that enemy regular forces had to be engaged in some way but failed to explain how; Krepinevich considers them irrelevant and pays only marginal consideration to their role in the conflict in Vietnam.⁵¹³ Still, there was no way to engage PAVN and Main Force VC units in a way different from what Westmoreland and later Abrams did. The large unit war was not a reflection of a strategic culture incapable of adapting but rather a stark reflection of battlefield necessity. Even if the PAVN role in the war was just a diversion and designed to protect the guerrilla, they had to be engaged.⁵¹⁴ Once this key criticism had been addressed, the available data simply did not support the rest of the case against MACV. Pacification and Civic Action were performed and, despite the orthodox view, there was a considerable effort to improve the effectiveness of the ARVN. Operational, strategic, and technical limits constrained the MACV effort more than Westmoreland's or the US Army's supposed flaws. Considering the abject failure of the usually proposed solution,

⁵¹² Hennessy, 'Strategy', pp. 123, 125 ;Krepinevich, 'Army and Vietnam', pp. 4-7, 213.

⁵¹³ Krepinevich, 'Army and Vietnam', p. 259; Hennessy, 'Strategy', pp. 186-187; Andrade, 'Westmoreland' p. 147.

⁵¹⁴ Hennessy, 'Strategy', p. 113; CIA, 'Intelligence Memorandum 1967'.

the III MAF's 'balanced approach', it is extremely difficult to fault the US Army and its strategic culture for the loss of South Vietnam.

Conclusions

Strategic Culture

If indeed there was some sort of tactical and operational victory for the American troops in Vietnam, as argued in the previous chapter, was it the product of strategic culture? Moving forward from the tactical and operational considerations, it is now easier to address the larger question. How much of the cultural background of the two services affected their performance in the Vietnam War and what can we learn from it?

While, as has been previously discussed, national policy, force constraints, enemy actions, local attitudes, terrain and climate all exerted an important influence in shaping American actions, the service own history and strategic culture acted as a sort of lens through which all these external influences were filtered. Army and Marine officers saw the same troop movements, the same engagements, and the same threats in different ways. Not only services but also branches played an important role. The results of that filtering are surprising and, to some extent, challenge the perceived lessons and truths repeated by several researchers.

Despite an organizational background eschewing prescriptive doctrine and focusing more on individual initiative, the US Marine Corps did not display the organizational flexibility, adaptation and ability to innovate that the supposedly much more rigid US Army displayed. The traits often associated with the US Army, firepower, over reliance on technology, and organizational inflexibility were common also in the US Marine Corps. Furthermore firepower, technology

and lack of doctrine hampered Marine operations. The Marines rather than the Army were hindered by their excessive reliance on unproven technology. Their informal doctrinal approach failed in Vietnam because there was no common ground between the various layers of officers and their schooling background. A small number of high level officers who shared service in Shanghai with the old 4th Marine Regiment used their own common experience to shape an operational and strategic approach in isolation both from their subordinates and their theoretical theatre commander. When the situation on the ground superseded their strategic model, command relations also suffered.

Traditional historians have focused on the debate between the two approaches held by Walt and Westmoreland as a debate between two military ideologies. The debate had been simplified to the point that both Lewis Walt and William Westmoreland had been reduced to empty caricatures. Even more critically, this debate had progressed from discussing the war in Vietnam to debating theoretical models of counterinsurgency strategy. In this generalization the internal problems in the way III MAF operated in Vietnam had been removed. The perceived flexibility of Marine leadership and their focus on the population rather than on the destruction of enemy conventional units has been used as evidence of the superior Marine approach to the war. The Army fixation on big units has been used to highlight failure. There have been little research relating these concepts with actual operations.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 discussed actual Marine operations in some detail to present a counterpoint to the conventional view of III MAF efforts in Vietnam. While

certainly innovative in some aspects, Marine operations proved less effective than the Marines had led everyone to believe. They also presented the idea that the shift from a 'big units' to a pacification strategy had been a product of the relative ease of the initial large scale operations, STARLITE and PIRANHA, and a general contempt for PAVN and VC main force units. Chapters 6 and 7 have also introduced the notion that, despite the accepted wisdom, the high casualties suffered and the immobilization of III MAF resources during the defence of the DMZ were more a product of the correlation of forces between the III MAF and the PAVN and deficiencies in the Marine force structure and operational methods rather than a product of Westmoreland's or McNamara's policies as generally claimed by Marine sources. As Lieutenant Coan grudgingly admitted in his book, the siege of Con Thien would have happened even without the McNamara line because Con Thien was a natural artillery observation post.

On the opposite side of the equation, the US Army, despite an apparently more rigid system, displayed innovation, flexibility and adaptation. MACV continually re-examined its approach and objectives, and new methods were discussed and attempted. Both the big units versus small units approach and MACV's attitude towards armoured vehicles are enlightening. Tactical methods were a tool to an end for the Army. Large operations were performed if necessary and productive, but, despite the oft repeated criticism, they were not an end to themselves. They served the purpose of destroying large PAVN concentration that in turn overcame the obstacles to implement a population centric strategy.

MACV's attitude toward armour is instructive. When General Westmoreland assumed his position as COMUSMACV (COMmander United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam), armoured vehicles, especially tanks, were considered unsuitable for Vietnam. There was both an organizational bias toward infantry in limited war situations and an apparently solid argument against vehicle operations in Vietnam. Still, the rigid system of the US Army allowed some officers, like Major General Weyand of the 25th Infantry Division, to challenge perceived truths and deploy tanks to Vietnam. Tactical employment of tanks and other armoured vehicles led to the MACV study and reassessment of the role of mechanized formations in Vietnam. Nothing similar was produced by the Marines, who used their tanks more as an afterthought rather than a full-fledged combat arm. The most effective armoured operations in Thua Thien and Quang Tri were US Army or, later, ARVN ones, often in areas where the Marines had lacked the ability to successfully employ mechanized formations.

But how did those different results relate to the different strategic cultures of the two organizations?

An USMC institutional Failure?

If, as has been previously argued, under the command of General Lewis Walt, the III MAF failed to significantly improve the military situation where did the responsibility lay? Was it Walt's personal fault or did the failure stem from deeper organizational problems in the USMC as a whole?

It has already been made clear that, in this author's opinion, General Walt bears the responsibility for the selection and the implementation of a strategy that was basically inappropriate to the situation on the ground. General Krulak also shares part of the responsibility. The different approach to the command relationship with MACV between him and his replacement, General Cushman, further highlights the role played by personality and attitudes to inter-service operations in fostering command conflicts. While General Walt was certainly one of the main culprits for the failure of the III MAF, three important institutional factors compounded the problems created by the General himself.

The tool he had been handed was far from effective. The force deployed to Vietnam was basically unsuited for the task at hand. As a combat organization, Marine divisions and the Marine Amphibious Forces lacked mobility, firepower and flexibility both due to lack of ground transport and insufficient helicopter support. Except in the airpower domain, the III MAF did not enjoy any significant advantage over the PAVN. To a certain extent the USMC in general and the III MAF in particular were largely a leftover from the glory days of World War Two. While the Corps itself had embraced modern technology in principle, the actual implementation of force modernization had been unbalanced and deprived of a sound doctrinal background. It is not a case where single systems were faulty, overall, all the systems in the USMC arsenal proved their effectiveness in battle, but a situation where modernization had been driven by organizational survival rather than operational need. In the same vein new concepts had been developed in a vacuum instead of in cohesive context.

The drive toward air mobility had been slanted toward 'strategic' air mobility rather than tactical or operational to ensure a premier place for the USMC as the national crisis response force. While this approach was not wrong, per se, it had not been placed in a more developed context. In simple terms, while the USMC had a strategy and a doctrine to rapidly deploy a force overseas, it had not given sufficient thought on how to fight or operate with such a force. While it is reasonable to pinpoint several of these shortcomings on technical and budgetary reasons, this situation had been created by an institutional pursuit of an unproven and nebulous concept of 'air mobility' that had left the bulk of the Marines, infantrymen, artillerymen and tankers behind. While no one can deny the tactical and operational benefits of air mobility on the battlefield, the interpretation of air mobility selected by the Corps was, in large part, focused on reshaping the USMC as a strategic rapid reaction force to ensure a critical role for the Corps in national strategy rather than exploiting helicopters in combat operations. In other words the air mobility shift of the late Fifties and early Sixties has to be interpreted more as a drive toward organizational survival rather than an adaptation to changed battlefield conditions. The overriding strategic concern for the Marines was the survival of the organization.

Only pressure from the "sharp end" in Vietnam and the realization that the proposed goal was operationally unsound due to technological limitations and thus not a critical component of national strategy, prompted the Headquarters to revert to a more balanced approach starting in the early Seventies. In Vietnam the lack of operational mobility and mechanized forces meant that the

bulk of the III MAF was a foot mobile infantry force tied to artillery bases with reduced combat effectiveness. This reduction in combat effectiveness had the perverse effect of requiring more and more troops to deal with unexpected threats reducing forces available for pacification. Eschewing mobile direct firepower (tanks) in favour of air and artillery support did not reduce the requirements for large scale operations. The Marine force structure was organized for rapid deployment and insertion, but it lacked the staying power of the US Army. To ensure a specific place in national strategic planning the Corps' leadership had overlooked the realities of ground combat.

The second institutional factor that hampered operations in Vietnam was the lack of willingness of the USMC to subordinate Marines to direct MACV control and to cooperate with other agencies. The overriding concern for survival did not only shape the force structure of the Corps, it also influenced its ability to work in a combined command structure. During Walt's tenure the III MAF was almost a world unto itself in Vietnam. Command independence was viewed as essential to preserve an independent organization, and subordination was viewed as a dangerous precedent to be avoided. Westmoreland made clear in his memoirs and personal papers that ordering the Marines to do something was difficult. Walt exploited the confused chain of command, with III MAF reporting both to MACV and FMFPAC, as a way to bypass MACV and appeal directly to FMFPAC commander General Krulak. In the end the arrangements between MACV and III MAF resembled an allied chain of command more than a national one. To a certain extent the arrangements were closer to the ones between MACV and the

South Vietnamese armed forces with the difference that, while personal relations between Westmoreland and the RVN Chief of Staff, General Cao Van Vien, were cordial and effective, the relations between Westmoreland and Walt were not. While the situation improved with the replacement of General Walt with General Cushman, the underlying problem was never addressed. This concern for command independence was also the probable reason that placed Walt in command of the III MAF in the first place. It also created a deep distrust for other agencies. Special Forces were considered a more or less unruly group of amateurs, MACV-SOG reports from Laos overlooked, intelligence coming down from MACV considered unreliable and even information provided by the Force Recon treated with disdain.

The overriding obsession with preserving an independent role for the Marines has to be viewed against the background of the careers of the general level officers involved, and this constitutes the third institutional factor. The Corps leadership represented a very specific community sharing several key factors. All of them had joined the corps before 1941 and witnessed some form of service in the so called 'banana wars' or in China in the 4th Marine Regiment. All had experienced both the dramatic expansion following the attack on Pearl Harbour and the equally dramatic downsizing after 1945 with the concomitant struggles for survival. Surprisingly, while several field grade officers acquired combat experiences during the Pacific War and in Korea, they did not seem to have used these experiences in Vietnam. The only direct reminder to fighting the Japanese came from General Peers of the 4th Infantry Division. With few significant

exceptions, all general level officers were products of the infantry branch. As an institution, the 1965 USMC was dominated by a close-knit community of officers that shared a very similar background and experiences. Due to the small size of the pre-1940 Corps, they also shared the same instructors and schooling. This uncommon situation generated two additional effects that reduced efficiency in Vietnam.

‘Minority’ branches like artillery and armour, especially the latter, took a subordinate position to infantry and, to a lesser extent, to aviation.⁵¹⁵ Since the USMC is basically an infantry organization with supporting arms, those supporting arms provided almost no input in planning, doctrine and force structure. Although the Corps had an Armor Policy Board created in 1949, it quickly faded into oblivion when the air mobility drive started.⁵¹⁶ Marine generals were first and foremost concerned with infantry. Second, the group shared the same lessons from their own experiences and military education. When they had to face a situation that was unplanned, they automatically reverted to the model they were familiar with. In doing that they skipped more recent and, possibly, more relevant experiences like the Philippines or even the 1st Marine Division experience dealing with guerrillas in Korea. They also did not heed the restrictions imposed by both the ODP and MACV’s reading of the situation in Vietnam. The institution itself had created a tunnel vision unable to accept external inputs or to deal with a combined organization framework. It is

⁵¹⁵ In Vietnam the only General level officer not produced by the infantry or aviation was General Collins, the initial commander of the III MAF quickly replaced by Lewis Walt.

⁵¹⁶ It is also interesting to note that no official historical study of USMC armour has ever been published while there is a two volume study on air mobility.

worth noting that General Collins, the temporary first commander of the III MAF, was a tanker, and, despite his qualifications and willingness to retain the position, he was quickly replaced by Lewis Walt, an infantryman, a former 4th Marine officer and, as previously mentioned, a stalwart champion of Marine independence.

This lack of flexibility from the top level was magnified by a lack of a widely accepted doctrine. The fact that the Marines worked on informal rather than formal doctrine coupled with the fact that limited war and counterinsurgency doctrine had not been internally created but was an US Army product exacerbated the problem. Informal doctrine is supposed to create a common understanding between the various elements of a military organization. US counterinsurgency doctrine was almost an alien thing for the USMC leadership. With the exception of General Krulak, no high ranking Marine had been involved in its creation. This in turn created a situation where two doctrines were at work simultaneously denying the basic purpose of doctrine, both formal and informal: the provision of a common framework. In Vietnam there was no such common framework in the III MAF. While usually the informal doctrinal framework had been a positive factor for the USMC during the Vietnam War, it proved the weak link of the entire organization.

Due to a strategic culture obsessed with infantry and institutional self-preservation, the US Marine Corps was indeed fighting the wrong war in Vietnam. Not being able to address the link between large enemy formations and insurgency, the III MAF fought two disconnected wars lacking resources to

do either successfully. Furthermore, the inability of the III MAF leadership, at least during Walt's tenure, to recognize the force shortcoming and act to redress them left the Marines unable to find a way to meet the full spectrum of enemy activities in a coherent manner.

Army Success?

Surprisingly enough the inflexible, career minded, and dogmatic US Army showed itself capable of adaptation, innovation and self-criticism. Despite the established trend of post-Vietnam Army scholars like Krepinevich, Sorley, and Nagl, the US Army was not an immovable behemoth incapable of learning or criticizing itself. When William C. Westmoreland arrived in Saigon in 1964, the US COIN approach as codified by ODP and as developed by the US Army had largely failed due to a combination of internal and external factors. In his first year in Vietnam, Westmoreland certainly did not prove himself to be a conventionally minded commander eager to deploy corps and armies to battle. He dutifully applied counterinsurgency principles trying to weed the guerrillas from the population with small unit actions, saturation patrolling and relying on local forces. He also advised against the introduction of American combat forces in South Vietnam. Despite Westmoreland's efforts, textbook COIN tactics were met by larger enemy units and brute force. Only when the enemy resorted to large scale conventional operations did General Westmoreland finally ask for American combat units, and he did it reluctantly. Westmoreland's first year as MACV commander was characterized by trial and error rather than dogmas. With the introduction of American combat forces and the expansion of the

mission of these forces from base security to active operations, Westmoreland and his subordinates had to craft an in-country strategy and operational method almost from scratch. It is remarkable that they were able to develop an effective method without clear instructions and only vague direction from above. The strategy that MACV implemented eschewed traditional counterinsurgency and was, apparently, centred on conventional operations.

Until recently, this apparent contradiction has been pinned on US Army strategic culture and a supposed preference for conventional versus unconventional warfare. Far from being just a temporary infatuation prompted by President Kennedy, the US Army interest in COIN never ceased. More importantly it built upon a strong basis represented by Colonel Volkmann's efforts in the early Fifties. While Volkmann's manuals were revised and replaced, their military techniques were basically retained even though Rostow's economic theories crept in after their inclusion at the centre of the ODP. Chapters 3 and 4 furthermore argued that the situation in Vietnam was not a 'textbook' insurgency but a partially conventional conflict where a conventional answer was a proper one, at least insofar as it was designed to address specific realities on the ground.

The strategy developed by MACV between 1965 and 1971 was predicated on this duality. MACV was forced to fight an undefined war shifting its operational focus according to the situation. Large scale conventional operations were not an end in themselves but a means to achieve a larger goal. MACV correctly surmised that US participation would have been limited in time, so it focused its efforts on areas where US forces were needed more urgently. Westmoreland's

analogy of bullies and termites was correct. The US Army was needed to stop the bullies, the PAVN and its main force VC surrogates, before they were able to collapse the 'house' that was the Republic of Vietnam. Even with this priority, the US Army was not fixated only with large scale sweeps. Large sweeps were replaced with smaller operations as soon actual conditions on the ground allowed even during the much maligned tenure of General Westmoreland. At the same moment while he was sending large forces north and urging the III MAF to go after the PAVN in the Khe Sanh Valley, he was also emphasizing smaller patrols in the once hotly contested III CTZ close to Saigon and scaling down large operations there. During the whole period the US Army continued to perform a civic action campaign employing considerable resources and on a bigger scale than the much more touted civic action effort of the III MAF. The fact that MACV managed to maintain an evolving balance between large scale and small scale operations and between direct combat and pacification is a testament to the flexibility of the US army and the intellectual abilities of the general officers involved.

Even more critical for the proper appreciation of the Army role is the fact that this dichotomy spanned both Westmoreland's and Abrams' periods rather than being an epiphany brought only by General Creighton Abrams as championed by Lewis Sorley. Small operations were performed by the 173rd Airborne Brigade in 1965 as large scale operations were performed under Abrams' command in 1969 and 1970. While Westmoreland was criticized for costly battles and attrition, the same critics failed to mention that General Abrams ordered the massive series of

sweeps in the A Shau Valley that culminated in Operation APACHE SNOW and the Battle for Dong Ap Bia. The Cambodian incursion, Operation ROCK CRUSHER/THOAN TANG, the largest Allied attack of the war, was directed by General Abrams too. Large operations were not as much a fixation of General Westmoreland as a product of the necessity to confront equally large PAVN and VC formations without being destroyed in the process. Only when US forces reached critically low levels and pressure to reduce casualties became unbearable did General Abrams end large operations.

Often large operations in Vietnam had been condemned as a reflection of the US Army culture rather than of the necessity of the war. The critics assumed a large, ponderous and inflexible conventional army revelling in large shows of forces and massive firepower. There are two basic flaws in this approach. The first flaw is the assumption that the US Army strategic culture was created only to fight in the plains of Central Germany. Now, besides the geographical fact that Central Germany lacked large plains, the US Army culture, as discussed in Chapter 1, was a combination of both pre-1940 heritage and World War Two experiences. While the majority of the officers had earned combat experience against the Axis powers or in Korea, they had also been trained in the shadows of Pershing, Bell and the Indian fighters of the XIX century. A minority of them also fought insurgents in Greece and, especially, in Korea. Despite the myth propagated after Vietnam, in some cases even by army official publications, COIN and limited

war theories were not imposed on the Army by President Kennedy, but they were a product of continued thinking and practice.⁵¹⁷

The same critics ignore the fact that the Army's main opponent, the PAVN, did not shy away from using heavy firepower on its own. They also conveniently ignore the initial engagement between small US Army formations and PAVN or main force VC where US units were, more often than not, saved only by extensive firepower. Large PAVN operations started before US combat units entered Vietnam, continued when US and Allied units were there, and reached their apex in 1972 and 1975 with the two large conventional 'final' offensives. The only two significant lulls were produced by Allied suppression of PAVN combat capabilities. As Palazzo pointed out in 1965 MACV did not have a choice between a conventional and unconventional approach.⁵¹⁸ Until the conventional threat receded there was never a real choice. Large operations were needed just to ensure survival of the engaged US and Allied units. This factor shaped US Army operations more than doctrinal tenets or a particular liking for big, divisional scale operations. This appreciation for enemy activities and capabilities was the primary driver in the selection of operational and tactical methods. As the Battle of Dak To in 1967 proved, using small units in the face of concentrated PAVN formations resulted in disasters. Failing to address combat realities and instead focusing on larger philosophical issues between conventional war and counterinsurgency had so vitiated the existing literature that the image of the US Army in Vietnam had become a caricature in several secondary works.

⁵¹⁷ Doughty, 'Doctrine', pp. 25-26; Birtle, 'Counterinsurgency', p. 234.

⁵¹⁸ Palazzo, 'Military Operations', p. 32.

Flowing from these operational and tactical considerations is the role of the Army cultural background in Vietnam. Far from being a straightjacket as it is usually portrayed, the Army culture was its greatest asset. It was certainly a less onerous background than the fractured Marine one. The US Army waded into Vietnam with a doctrine that was not appropriate for the environment. The ODP framework was flawed with its over-reliance on economy and the inability to address and cope with enemy-directed escalation. Compounding theoretical flaws, the majority of institutional knowledge on Vietnam itself was partial and biased especially the over reliance on Bernard Fall's analysis. Despite these constraints, MACV was able to adapt and evolve. While the adaptation was certainly not perfect and not always successful, it did, indeed, happen, and it was a continuous and institution wide process rather than the product of a restricted group of 'Young Turks' as some authors claim.⁵¹⁹

US Army doctrine was, and still is, formal and prescriptive. In Vietnam this turned out to be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. It ensured a common framework and a common institutional knowledge. Every officer at each level shared it. Being formal and prescriptive had ensured that doctrine was discussed during its creation at all levels and properly disseminated. When changes had to be implemented, the process again involved a broader base of officers at different levels and from different specializations.

The Army entered Vietnam with a strong opposition to the employment of armour based on several grounds. By 1969 armoured units were a critical part of

⁵¹⁹ Birtle, 'PROVN', pp. 1245-1246.

almost every operation. The MACV study and its role in reversing initial preconceptions on armoured operations is a very important example of US Army flexibility. Operations were discussed and analysed, and lessons drawn and implemented. The same comments can be applied to General Westmoreland's 1966 review and criticism of combat operations. Another similar example is the reorganization of infantry battalions in theatre to better cope with local conditions. Nothing similar was produced by the III MAF or by the USMC. Operational shortcomings were never addressed and any improvement was left to individual initiatives.

This last aspect underscores the other big difference between the US Army and the US Marines. Being a larger institution, the US Army never fostered the close parochialism of the Corps. Different branches shared equal rights and almost equal weight in crafting doctrine and shaping the institutional culture. While the Corps didn't have a non-infantryman as Commandant until 1970, Army Chiefs of Staff came from different branches. Westmoreland himself was an artilleryman, and Abrams was a tanker. Furthermore, there was nothing like the mythical 4th Marine Regiment in China to shape the Army leadership. There was no single mission focus because the US Army had global commitments and requirements.

Legacies

Using General Walt's words, Vietnam was a strange war requiring a strange strategy. While the US Army was indeed successful in its strategy, that alone was not sufficient to resolve the conflict on terms favourable to the United States.

While the military effort did achieve some sort of victory in its own terms, it was not sufficient to win the broader conflict. That has sparked controversies without end on the role of the military effort itself and on larger aspects of national strategy. Sadly, the controversies over the final results and on the responsibilities for the ultimate failure have overshadowed the real operations and accomplishments, or lack of thereof, on the ground. One of the most negative aspects of the controversies is that actual history as being replaced by simple, almost abstract, models of strategy.

To a certain extent the Marines were able to exploit this situation to strengthen the Corps as an institution. Emphasizing their CAP campaign and their opposition to the 'big units' war they were able to fit into the COIN school that emerged in the late Eighties. They claimed to have waged a successful campaign notwithstanding the problems encountered in actual operations. Their institution emerged strengthened and was better able to use the Vietnam War to uphold its organizational goals. The Marines did produce official histories and monographs, the officers involved published memoirs and the Corps was able to get its own version of the events in print as soon as possible. With very few exceptions, all the published material subscribed to the same version: the Marines were never defeated; all the problems were caused by Washington and Saigon and by the lack of understanding of the smartness of the Corps. While this is a simplification, it is a common trend in Marine historiography. With the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, this narrative has even increased. While the official history gave the war a balanced coverage, later publications pushed this

simplified narrative to the extreme, especially with the rise of unconventional operations in recent years. Marine operations in Vietnam had been displayed as 'the model' for COIN. Again the USMC Strategic Culture and its main goal of self-preservation and of 'mythologizing' past experiences prevailed over sound analysis.

The US Army remained instead largely silent until recently. Its official history is not even complete at the time of this writing with the critical volume about the Tet Offensive still being compiled. While individual officers have been able to defend or criticize the Army role in the war, the Army itself has never decided to present a unified institutional version like the Corps did. In large part this stemmed from the different strategic culture of the two institutions. If the Marines did need to use Vietnam to uphold their case, the US Army just needed to move to the next contingency, Central Europe and the Persian Gulf. Vietnam was not considered relevant to future conflicts. Only when faced by something different than mass mechanized warfare has the Army started to rediscover Vietnam. Faced with a complex situation refusing to fit into simple models, the necessity to look back at history is relevant for the Army's current success. But without the strong historical-mythological drive of the USMC, the Army is not able to present a coherent institution-wide version of its past. Even today, several generals prefer to rely on second and third hand history rather than on their own historical branch. The situation has not really changed since 1965.

Vietnam defied classification at the time and still does. It also defied the easy answers that often have been created. Hopefully this work has demonstrated

that war cannot be simply divided between COIN, conventional, and whatever other definition is adopted. It has also shown that the flattening of strategic culture to easily recognizable 'caricatures' or the reduction of military strategy and operations to simple theoretical models of absolute value is wrong and prone to create more problems than it can solve.

Bibliography

Primary Material

Unpublished Official Documents

US Army Center for Military History, Carlisle Barracks.

Westmoreland Papers

Williams Papers

Abrams Papers

DePuy Papers

Historian Files

Interview by Ronald Spector with Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow,
Dec. 9, 76, Historians files, CMH;

Interview by Ronald Spector with Col Ernest P. Lasche, U.S. Army
(Retired), 30 Aug 79, Historians files, CMH

Interview of George MacGarrigle with General Rosson, 13 Sep
1967 CMH Historian Files

Message Files

National Archives and Record Administration (NARA)

Record Group 127: Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, 1775 – 1999. This group includes the Command Chronologies (ComC) of all Marine units and selected After Action Reports (AAR).

Record Group 218: Joint Chiefs of Staff, US (1941-78)

Record Group 319: Army Staff (1903-92)

Record Group 334: Interservice Agencies (1916-73)

Record Group 338: Army Operational, Tactical, and Support Organizations (World War II and Thereafter), US, 1942- (1917-93)

Record Group 472: Southeast Asia, US Forces in, 1950-1975 (1950-76).

This group includes both the Operational Reports Lessons Learned (ORLL) and the After Action Reports (AAR) from US Army units.

National Defense University Archives Fort McNair

Report, Counterinsurgency Review Board, 1st Dec 65

Library of Congress Manuscript Division

Sheenan Papers

US Marine Corps Headquarters History Division, Quantico

Commandant Marine Corps Files (CMC)

Krulak Papers

Drake Files

Burke Files

Message Files

Command Chronologies (duplicated in NARA Record Group 127: Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, 1775 – 1999)

After Action Reports

Official history comments files (also called Vietnam Comment files):

Lt Gen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft MS, n.d. (1981)

LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May78]
(Vietnam Comment File MCHC),

Gen Wallace M . Greene, Jr ., Comments on draft MS, dtd 5 May
78 (Vietnam Comment File MCHC)

LtCol Ralph E . Sullivan, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9May78
(Vietnam Comment File MCHC)

Col George W . Carrington, Jr ., Comments on draft MS,dtd
15May78 (Vietnam Comment File)

Col Samuel M . Morrow, Comments on draft MS, dtd 23May78
(Vietnam Comment File MCHC)

LtCol Dwain A. Colby, Comments on draft MS, dtd 2 Jun78
(Vietnam Comment File).

Col Leon N . Utter, Comments on draft MS, dtd 13Jul78 (Vietnam
Comment File MCHC)

Col Noble L .Beck, Comments on draft MS, n. d. [Aug 78] (Vietnam
Comment Files MCHC)

General Cushman comments on Draft Manuscript 17May81,
(Vietnam Comment Files MCHC)

Col Van D . Bell, Jr ., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15 Jun7 8
(Vietnam Comment File)

Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, Comments on draft MS, dtd
27May78 (Vietnam Comment File MCHC)

Oral History Collection

Col Alexander D. Cereghino interview by FMFPac, n .d.
(No.450 ,OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC)

Col Donald W. Sherman interview by FMFPac, 6 August 19966
(No. 199, OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC)

General Raymond G. Davis interview, 2 Feb 1977, (Oral History
collection MCHC)

LtGen John R. Chaisson intvw by Hist&MusDiv, 3 April 1972
(OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv ,HQMC)

MajGen Wood B. Kyle intvw by HistDiv, 9, 12, and 16 June 1969
(OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC)

Texas Tech University, Vietnam Archive and Center, Lubbock

Douglas Pike Collection

United States Marine Corps Document Collection

Larry Berman Collection

CHECO Collection

Bud Harton Collection

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston

Presidential Recordings

Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin

Telephone Conversations

National Security Action Memorandums (NSAM)

Country Files, Vietnam

Published Official sources

Military History Branch, Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Command History, 1964* Saigon 1965

Command History, 1965 Saigon 1966

Command History, 1966 Saigon 1967

Command History, 1967, 3 Vols. Saigon 1968

Command History, 1968, 2 Vols. Saigon 1969

Command History, 1969, 3 Vols. Saigon 1970

Command History, 1970, 4 Vols. Saigon 1971

Command History, 1971, 2 Vols. Saigon 1972

Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam, Saigon 1967.

US Army Field Manuals:

30-104 Handbook on Aggressor Insurgent War 1967

31-15 Operations Against Airborne Attack, Guerrilla Action, and Infiltration 1953

31-15 Operations Against Irregular Forces 1961

31-16 Counter guerrilla Operations 1963

31-16 Counter guerrilla Operations 1967

31-20 Operations Against Guerrilla Forces 1951

31-21 Organization and Conduct of Guerrilla Warfare 1951

31-21 Guerrilla Warfare 1955

31-21 Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations 1958

31-21 Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations 1961

31-21 Special Forces Operations 1965

31-22 U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Forces 1963

31-23 Stability Operations: U.S. Army Doctrine 1967

31-73 Advisor Handbook for Counterinsurgency 1965

100-5 Field Service Regulations, Operations 1954

100-5 Field Service Regulations, Operations 1962

100-20 Field Service Regulations, Counterinsurgency 1964

Foreign Relations of United States Series:

FRUS 1955-57, vol. I

FRUS 1958-1960, vol. I

FRUS 1961-1963, vol. III

FRUS 1961-63 vol. VIII

FRUS 1964-1968 Vol. I

FRUS 1964-1968, Vol. II

FRUS 1964-1968 Vol. III

Various Documents

Sharp, Ulysses S. G. and William C. Westmoreland. *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of June 30, 1968*. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1969.

US Congress, House committee on Armed Services, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1947-1967: Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, 12 Vols*. Washington DC: Government Printing Office 1971 containing the following documents:

Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) Data Book, 1967

MSG JCS to CinCPac, dtd 6Mar65

Office of Assistant Secretary of Defence (SA), South East Asia Analysis Rpt, control no. 6-608, Sep 67

OASD (SA), Sep 67, sub: Southeast Asia Analysis Report, pp. 10-12 and Nov 67,
same subject pp. 54-56

OASD (SA), vol 1. pp. 21-25

Official Histories

Carland, John M. *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966*. Washington DC : Center of Military History United States Army, 2001.

Clarke, Jeffrey J. *Advice and Support: The Final Years 1965-1975*. Washington: Center of Military History United States Army, 1988.

Cosmas, Graham. *MACV, The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-67*. Washington: Center of Military History United States Army,, 2006.

— .*MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*. Washington: Center of Military History United States Army, 2007

George MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*. Washington: Center of Military History, 1998.

Pribbenow, Merle, [trans.]. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People Army of Vietnam, 1965-1975*. Lawrence : Kansas Univeristy Press, 2002.

Shulimson, Jack and Johnson, Charles M. *US Marines In Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*. Washington, DC : History and Museum Division, Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1978.

Shumlinson, Jack. *US Marines in Vietnam 1966: An Expanding War*. Washington DC : History and Museum Division, Headquarters US Marine Corps, 1982.

Shumlinson, Jack, et al. *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*. Washington D.C. : USMC Headquarters, History and Museums Division, 1997.

Smith, Charles R. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, High Mobility and Standown 1969*. Washington DC : History and Museums Division, HQ USMC, 1988.

Spector, Ronald H. *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the US Army In Vietnam, 1951-1964*. Washington : Center of Military History, United States Army, 1983.

Starry, Donn A. *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*. Washignton DC : Department of the Army, 2002.

Telfer, Gary L, Rogers, Lane and Fleming, V Keith Jr. 1984. *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*. Washington : History and Museum Division, Headquarters US Marine Corps, 1984.

Van Staaveren, Jacob. *Gradual Failure*. Washington : United States Air Force, 2002.

Secondary Sources

Books

- Anderson, David L. *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam 1953-1961*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Bacevich, A. J. *Diplomat in Khaki*. Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1989.
- Bergerud, Eric. *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991.
- Bickel, Keith. *Mars Learning; The Marine Corps Development of Small Wars Doctrine*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000.
- Birtle, Andrew J.. *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976*. Washington: Center of Military History United States Army, 2007.
- Bittner, Donald F. *Curriculum Evolution Marine Corps Command and Staff College 1920-1988*. Washington: USMC History Division, 1988.
- Braestrup, Peter. *Big Story: how the american Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*. Garden City NY: Anchor Press, 1978.
- Clarke, Bruce B. G. *Expendable Warriors: The Battle of Khe Sanh and the Vietnam War*. Westport: Praeger, 2007.
- Coan, James P. *Con Thien, The Hill of Angels*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007.
- Corson, William R. *The Betrayal*. New York: Norton, 1968
- Currey, Cecil B. *Victory at Any Cost: The Genius of Viet Nam's Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2000.
- Builder, Carl H. *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Davidson, Phillip B. *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975*. Novato: Presidio, 1988

- Davies, B. Mackay G. *The Men Who Persevered*. Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2005.
- Dockrill, Saki R. *Eisenhower's New Look National Security Policy*. London: Macmillan, 1996.
- Doidge, Michael and Andrew Wiest, *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Doughty, Robert A. *The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-1976*. Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1979.
- Estes, Kenneth W. *Marines Under Armor*. Annapolis: United States Naval Institute Press, 2000.
- Giap, Vo Nguyen. *Big Victory, Great Task*. New York: Praeger, 1968
- Gilbert, Oscar E. *Marine Corps Tank Battles in Vietnam*. Newbury: Casemate Publishing, 2007.
- . *Marine Tank Battles in the Pacific*. Da Capo Press, 2001.
- . *The US Marine Corps in the Vietnam War: III Marine Amphibious Force 1965-75*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2006.
- . *US Marine Corps Tank Crewman 1965-70*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004.
- Gillespie, Robert M. *Black Ops Vietnam: The Operational History of MACVSOG*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011
- Greenberg, Lawrence. *The Hukbalahap Insurrection*. Washington: US Army Historical Center, 1987.
- Henessy, Michael A. *Strategy in Vietnam, The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-72*. Westport: Praeger, 1997.
- Hoffman, George F. and Donn A. Starry, *From Camp Colt to Desert Storm*. Lexington , 1999.
- Hunnicut, R.P. *Bradley: A History of the American Infantry Fighting Vehicle*. Novato: Presidio, 1999.
- . *Patton: A History of the American Main Battle Tank*. Novato: Presidio, 1984.
- Krepinevich, Andrew F. *The Army and Vietnam*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986.

- Kronh, Charles A. *The Lost Battalion: Controversy and Casualties in the Battle of Hue*. Westport: Praeger, 1993.
- Lehrack, Otto. *Road of 10000 Pains: The Destruction of the 2nd NVA Div. by the U.S. Marines, 1967*. Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2010.
- Lewy, Guenter, *America in Vietnam*, New York: Oxford University Press: 1978
- Lind, Michael. *Vietnam The Necessary War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002.
- Linn, Brian M. *The Philippine War, 1899-1902*. Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2000.
- McKay, Gary and Nicholas Graeme. *Jungle Tracks: Australian Armour in Viet Nam*. Crows Nest: Allen&Unwin, 2001.
- McCoy, James W. *Secrets of the Viet Cong*. New York: Hyppocrene Books, 1992.
- McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Michel, Marshall L. III. *Clashes: Air Combat Over North Vietnam 1965-1972*. Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1997.
- . *The 11 Days of Christmas, America's Last Vietnam Battle*. New York: Encounter Books, 2001.
- Millett, Allan R. *Semper Fidelis*. New York: Free Press, 1991.
- . *The War for Korea 1945-1950: A House Burning*. Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2005.
- Millet, Allan R. and Maslowski Peter. *For the Common Defense: A Military history of the United States of America*. New York: Free Press, 1994.
- Moyar, Mark. *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*. Lincoln: University Press of Nebraska, 2008.
- . *Triumph Forsaken*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Murphy, Edward F. *Dak To 173rd Airborne Brigade in South Vietnam's Central Highlands, 1967*. New York: Presidio Press, 1994
- . *Semper Fi Vietnam, From Da Nang to the DMZ Marine Corps Campaigns, 1965-1975*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1997
- Nagl, John. *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya to Vietnam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

- Newman, John M. *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power*. New York: Warner Books, 1992.
- Nguyen, Thi Dinh. *No Other Road to Take: Memoirs of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh*. Trans. Elliot Mai Van. Ithaca: Cornell University, 1976.
- Nolan, Keith William. *Search and Destroy: The Story of an Armored Cavalry Squadron in Viet Nam, 1/1 CAV, 1967-1968*. Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2010
- Palazzo, Albert. *Australian Military Operations in Vietnam*. Canberra: Army History Unit, 2006.
- Palmer, Bruce. *The 25 Year War: America Military Role in Vietnam*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1990.
- Palmer, Dave Richard. *Summons of the Trumpet: A History of the Vietnam War from a Military Man's Viewpoint*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1978
- Pearson, Willard. *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966-1968*. Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1975.
- Pham Van Son and Le Van Duong. *The Viet cong Tet Offensive*. Saigon: Joint General Staff, 1969
- Pike, Douglas. *PAVN: People Army of Vietnam*. Novato: Presidio, 1986
- Porter, Gareth, ed. *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decision*. Vol. 2. Stanfordville: E.M. Coleman, 1979. 2 vols.
- Prados, John and Ray W. Stubbe. *Valley of Decision*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004.
- . *Vietnam, the History of an unwinnable war*. Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2009.
- Pribbenow, Merle L., trans. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002.
- Ramsey, Robert D. *A Masterpiece of Counter guerrilla Warfare: BG J. Franklin Bell in the Philippines, 1901-1902*. Leavenworth: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2007.
- . *Savage Wars of Peace: Case Studies of the Pacification in the Philippines, 1900-1902*. Leavenworth: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2007.

- Scales, Robert H. *Firepower in Limited Wars* . New York: Presidio 1998.
- Sharp, Ulysses S. Grant. *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect*. San Rafael CA: Presidio, 1978.
- Snyder, Jack. *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Military Operations*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1977.
- Sorley, Lewis S. *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* . London: Brassey, 1998.
- Sorley, Lewis S. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. Orlando: Mariner Books, 2007.
- Spector, Ronald. *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*. New York: Free Press, 1993
- Stanton, Shelby L. *Vietnam Order of Battle; A Complete Illustrated Reference to US Army Combat and Support forces in Vietnam 1961-1973*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2003.
- . *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam*. New York: Dell ,1985.
- Summers, Harry G. Jr. *On Strategy: A critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. New York: Presidio Press, 1984.
- Tolson, John J. *Airmobility,, 1961-1971*. Washington D.C.: US Army Center of Military History 1973
- Tran, Dinh Tho. *Indochina Monographs: Pacification*. Washington D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1979.
- Trauschweizer, Ingo. *The Cold War US Army, Building Deterrence for Limited War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008.
- Trinh, Nhu, ed. *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap*. Vol. 21. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2002.
- Villard, Erik B. *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue* . Fort McNair: US Army Center of Military History, n.d.
- Walt, Lewis A. *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970.
- Westmoreland, William C. *A Soldier Reports*. Cambridge, MS: Da Capo Press, 1989.

- Wilikins, Warren. *Grab Their Belt to Fight Them, The viet Cong Big Unit War against the U.S., 1965-1966*. Annapolis: United States Naval Institute Press, 2011.
- Willbanks, James H. *Abandoning Vietnam, How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War*. Kansas: Kansas University Press, 2004.
- Wilson, John B. *Maneuver and Firepower, The Evolution of Divisions and Separate Brigades*. Washington: Center of Military History, US Army, 1998.
- Zaffiri, Samuel. *Hamburger Hill*. New York: Presidio Press, 1988.

Articles

- Andrade, Dale and James H. Willbanks. "CORDS/Phoenix: Revisiting Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future." *Military Review* March-April 2006: 9-23.
- Andrade, Dale. "Westmoreland was right: learning the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19.2 (2008): 145-181.
- Bebe, John E. "Beating the Guerrilla." *Military Review* XXIV.9 (1955): 3-18.
- Birtle, Andrew J. "Persuasion and Coercion in Counterinsurgency Warfare." *Military Review* (2008): 45-53.
- . "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: a Reappraisal." *Journal of Military History* 72 (2008): 1213-1247.
- Breastup, Peter. "The Abrams Strategy in Vietnam." *The New Leader* 9 June 1969: 4.
- Carland, John. "Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland Approach in Two Documents." *Journal of Military History* 60.2 (2004): 553-574.
- Daddis, Gregory A. "On Lewis Sorley's Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam." *Parameters* (2011): 99-105.

- East, C. H. A. "Guerrilla Warfare." *Military Review* September 1957: 95-100.
- Ginsburgh, Robert N. "Damn the Insurrectos." *Military Review* January 1964: 58-70.
- Gray, Colin S. "Comparative Strategic culture." *Parameters* (Winter 1984): 26-33.
- Gray, John A. "A Plea for Revision of the Field Officers' Course." *Marine Corps Gazette* February 1931.
- Gruenther, Richard. "Guerrilla Warfare." *Infantry* April 1957.
- Harris, Albert E. "Partisan Warfare." *Military Review* August 1950: 10-20.
- "Interview with Commandant Greene." *The Washington Post* 2 May 1965: 3.
- Kirkland, Faris M. "The Attack on Cap Mui Lay, Vietnam July 1968." *Journal of Military History* 61, (1997): 735-736
- Linn, Brian M. "Pacification in Northwestern Luzon: An American Regiment in the Philippine-American War, 1899-1901." *Pilipinas* December 1982: 14-25.
- Loomis, Frederick H. "Report from Greece." *Military Review* XXX.1 (1950): 8-9.
- Mahnken, Thomas G. "United States Strategic Culture." SCIENCE APPLICATIONS INTERNATIONAL CORP WASHINGTON DC, 2006.
- McLellan, Edwin. "American Marines In Nicaragua." *Marine Corps Gazette* June 1921.
- Metcalf, George T. "Offensive Partisan Warfare." *Military Review* April 1952: 53-61.
- Metzgar, Greg. "Unconventional Warfare: Definitions from 1950 to Present." *Special Warfare* 14.1 (2001): 18-24.
- Peers, Robert. "Guerrilla Operations in Northern Burma." *Military Review* XXVIII.3 (1948): 10-16.
- Porter, Gareth, ed. *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decision*. Vol. 2. Stanfordville: E.M. Coleman, 1979. 2 vols.
- Prados, John. "Vietnam Climax, The Siege of Khe Sanh." *Against The Odds* July 2002: 2-16.
- Pribbenow, Merle and Veith, George. "Fighting is an Art: The Army of the Republic of Vietnam's Defense of Xuan Loc, 9-21 April 1975", *Journal of Military History* 64, (2004): 163-214

Pribbenow, Merle. "General Võ Nguyên Giáp and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tết Offensive", *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 2008): 1-33

Rast, James. "Highland Fox: The 2nd Infantry Division Off-Post Counterinsurgency Exercise." *Infantry* May-June 1965: 45-49.

Smith, Richard B Col. USMC. "Leatherneck Square." *Marine Corps Gazette* August 1969.

Sorley, Lewis S. "The Quiet War: Revolutionary Development." *Military Review* 47.11 (1967): 14.

Tilman, Robert O. "The Non Lessons of the Malayan Emergency." *Military Review* December 1966: 62-71.

Willam, Dion. "The Education of a Marine Officer. II. The Marine Corps Schools." *Marine Corps Gazette* August 1931.

PhD Dissertations:

Winn, Kenneth Eugene , *Did the Marines Better Understand the Nature of the Vietnam Conflict and Was the Combined Action Program More Suitable than Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support in Dealing With Insurgents?* (PhD dissertation, Command and Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2000),

Brevington, Brooks, *Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement* (PhD dissertation, Command and Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1996)

Williamson, Curtis III, *The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP): A Proposed Alternative Strategy for the Vietnam War*. (PhD dissertation, Command and Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2002)

Herbert, Paul, *Toward the Best Available Thought*, (Ph.D dissertation Ohio State University 1985)